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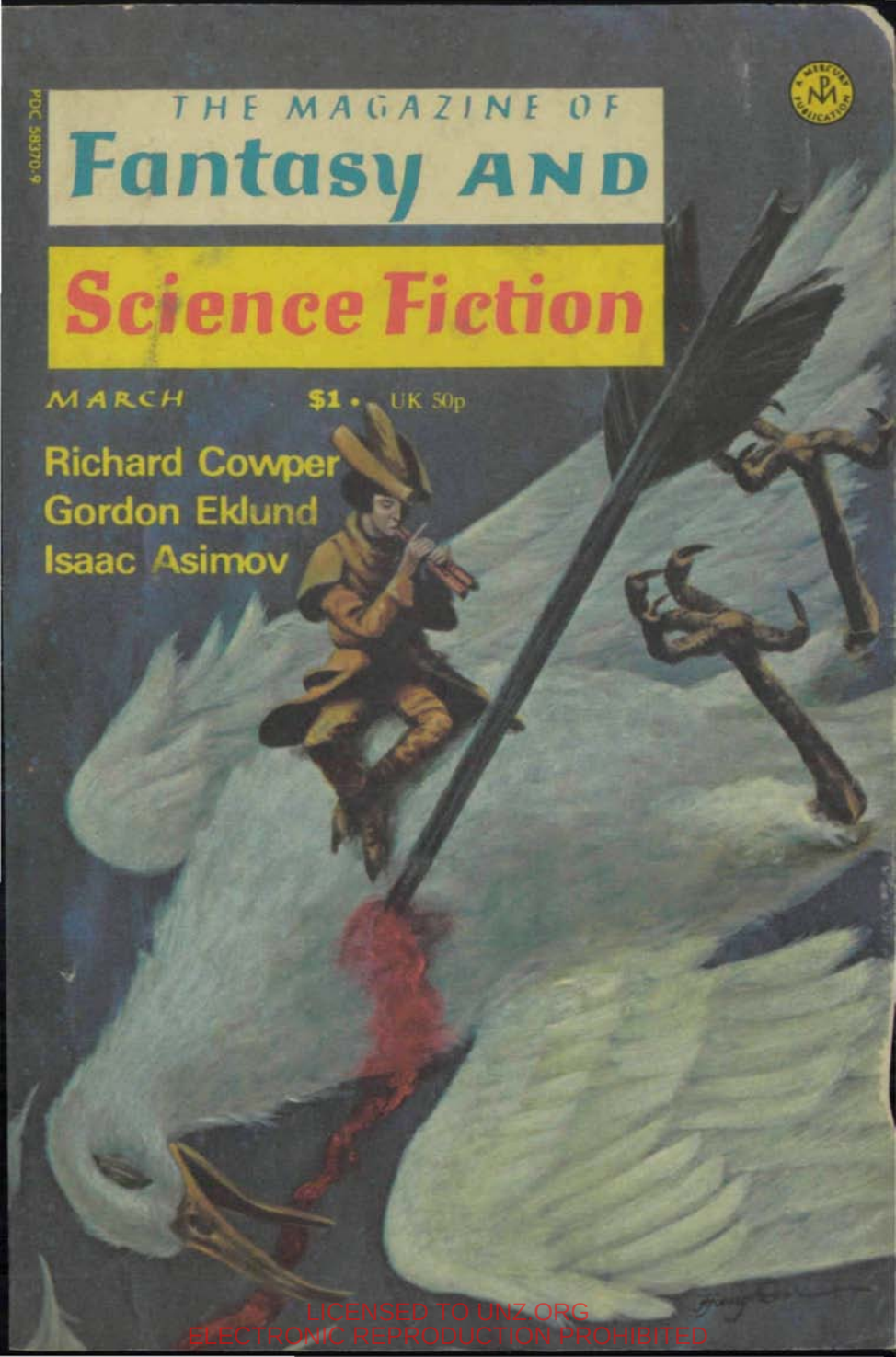

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

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Edward L. Ferman, EDITOR & PUBLISHER — Isaac Asimov, SCIENCE EDITOR
Dale Beardale, CIRCULATION MANAGER — Audrey Ferman, BUSINESS MANAGER
Anne W. Deraps, ASSISTANT EDITOR

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Richard Cowper wrote "The Custodians" (F&SF, October 1975), has published several superior novels, and we recently acquired two new stories. "The Hertford Manuscript" and "Paradise Beach," both coming up soon. On the basis of this work alone (there may be more), we feel justified in calling him the most elegant and colorful storyteller to come along in this field in some time. You have a real treat in store with this new tale of adventure, which is set at the end of the next millenium and concludes with the ringing in of the year 3000.

Piper At The Gates Of Dawn

by RICHARD COWPER

Among the twenty-two books which comprise the Avian Apocrypha, the one which has been called by certain scholars "Old Peter's Tale," and by others "The Book of Gyre," has always occupied a place somewhat apart from the rest.

Recent close textual and stylistic analysis by Professor P. J. Hollins and others would appear to have confirmed the presence of no fewer than three distinct contributing hands, at least two of which have been confidently identified with the anonymous authors of "The Book of Morfedd" and "Orgen's Dream."

In electing to offer to a wider public this new version compiled from the three earliest extant manuscripts, I have purposely eschewed the two titles by which the work is generally familiar and have chosen instead that under which the story appears in the "Carlisle m.s." (circa A.D. 3,300).

R. J. C., St. Malcolm's College,
Oxford. June, 3798.

Cold curtains of November rain came drifting slowly up the valley like an endless procession of phantom mourners following an invisible hearse. From beneath an overhang of limestone a boy and an old man squatted side by side and gazed disconsolately out across the river to the dripping forest on the far bank. Suddenly a salmon leapt — a flicker of silver in the gloom and a splash like a falling log. The boy's eyes gleamed. "Ah," he breathed. "Did you see him?"

The old man grunted.

"I'm going to try for him, Peter."

The man glanced round out of the tail of his eye and sniffed skeptically. "What with?"

The boy unfastened the thong of his leather knapsack, delved inside, and pulled out a slender double-barreled wooden pipe — something between a twin-stemmed

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whistle and a recorder. He rubbed it briskly on the sleeve of his grey woollen pullover, then set the mouthpiece to his lips and blew softly. A note, clear and liquid as a blackbird's, floated out from beneath his fingers. Another followed, and another, and then came a little frisking trill that set the old man's pulse fluttering.

"Who taught you to play like that, lad?"

"Morfedd."

The boy rose to his feet, stepped out into the rain, and had taken four or five paces down the slope towards the river's edge when the old man called him back. "Here," he said, pulling off his cap and flinging it across. "It'll keep the rain off your neck."

The boy grinned his thanks, dragged the waxed leather scuttle over his untidy mop of black curls, and skipped down to where a flat rock jutted out into the stream. There he squatted, as close as he could get to the hurrying tawny water, and once more put the pipe to his lips.

Squinting through the veiling rain, the old man became uncomfortably aware of a chill area around the back of his neck where his cap had been, and he hunched down deeper into the collar of his sheepskin coat. Like wisps of gossamer, odd disconnected threads of music came floating up to him from the rain-pocked waters below, and as he half listened, there suddenly flickered unbidden across his mind's eye a lightning-sharp vision of a large and succulent dragonfly. So vivid was the image that for a confusing second he was convinced the insect was hovering a mere handspan before his nose. Next instant, there was an excited shouting from below, a flurry of splashing, and he saw the boy staggering among the rain-wet boulders at the water's edge with a huge silver fish struggling in his arms.

With an alacrity which wholly belied his years the old man scrambled down the bank just in time to prevent the boy from measuring his own length in a pool. He grabbed at the gulping salmon, thrust his thumbs firmly into its gills, and contrived to bang its head against a rock. "Blast me, boy!" he cried. "I never saw such luck in all my days! Blast me if I did!"

The boy laughed delightedly. "He's *big*, isn't he? Did you see him jump? Right up at me! *Swoosh!*"

The old man lifted the shuddering fish and contrived to hold it out at arm's length. "I'll swear he's nigh on ten kils," he panted. "A regular whale! What are we going to do with him?"

"Why, eat him, of course."

"Ah, some for sure, lad. The rest we'd best try to smoke. But

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we've got to get ourselves across the stream first. With all this rain, by nightfall she'll be up to twice your own height, and it's ten lom or more round by Kirkby bridge. Nip you up aloft and fetch the packs. We'll try for a crossing up around the bend."

The boy clambered back up to the overhang and ducked out of sight. The old man selected a stout stick from among a tangle of driftwood, took a clasp knife from his pocket and, having sharpened one end of the stick to a point, spiked it through the salmon's gills and hefted the fish up on to his back.

Twenty minutes later the two of them were over the river and picking their way along the deer track that followed the far bank. By then the rain had eased off to a steady, depressing drizzle. Though it was barely two hours gone noon, the low clouds and the brooding forest dimmed the light almost to curfew gloom. Conversation between the two travelers was restricted to grunts of warning and acknowledgment as the old man negotiated rocks and exposed tree roots which had been made even more treacherous by the rain.

They had covered some two kilometers in this fashion when the track broadened out perceptibly into a discernible path. The boy at once seized the opportunity to move up to the old man's side. "Will we reach Sedbergh before nightfall, Peter?"

"Not without breaking our necks, we won't. But I recall a 'stead hereabouts might lodge us for the night. I've been trying to bring the man's given name to mind, but it's twenty year or more since I last trod this track."

"A farmer, is he?"

"Bit of everything, as I recall it. Like most of 'em round here. Newton? Norton? *Norris! That's* the name! Norris Cooperson! Yes, yes, now it comes back. Old Sam Cooperson was a color-sergeant in Northumberland's dragoons. Won his freedom in the Battle of Rotherham in 2950. That takes us back a bit, doesn't it? Old Sam leased a stretch of the Lord's grazing down the river a way. Did well enough for his boy to buy the freehold. I seem to recall that young Norris wed a lass from Aysgarth. And didn't her people have property round York? Or was it Scarborough? Funny how his name slipped me. Norris. Norris Cooperson. Aye, that's him."

"Where does he live, Peter?"

"On a bit yet. I seen to mind a beck skipping down from the fells. Old Sam built his 'stead facing southwest, backing right up into the hills. 'Guarding his rear' he called it." The old man chuckled. "Sergeant Cooperson had a Jock

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spear up his arse in his time. So he knew what he was talking about."

They came to a waist-high wall of rough stone which had recently been repaired, clambered over it, and headed off on a diagonal course away from the river. After they had gone about five hundred paces, the old man paused, lifted his head, and snuffed the air like a dog. The boy watched him closely. "Smoke?" he asked.

"Horses," said the old man. "Smoke too. It can't be far now."

The ground rose slightly, and the forest trees began to thin out almost as if they were withdrawing fastidiously from a contact which was distasteful to them. The two wayfarers trudged up to the crest of the rise and saw below them, and a long bowshot off to their left, the low outline of a substantial stone stable, a bracken-thatched barn, a farmhouse and a scattering of timber outbuildings. A herd of long-horned, hump-backed cattle was grazing in the wide meadow which sloped gently down from the homestead to the distant river.

The old man shifted the salmon from one shoulder to the other and nodded with satisfaction. "I wasn't wrong, was I, Tom? But it's grown a fair bit since I last set eye on it. Reckon you'd best get yourself a stick while you can. They're bound to have a dog or two."

The boy shook his head. "They won't bother me."

"It's not *you* I'm feared for, lad. It's our supper here."

"The boy unfastened his knapsack and again took out his pipe. "Dogs are the easiest of all," he said scornfully. "They'll believe *anything*."

The old man studied him thoughtfully, sucked a tooth, seemed on the point of saying something, and then, apparently, changed his mind. Side by side they plodded off down the hill towards the farm.

The shaggy cattle raised their heads at their approach, regarded them with mild, munching curiosity, and then nodded back to their grazing. They had passed almost through the herd before the farm dogs got wind of them. They came hurtling out from behind the stables, three lean, vicious-looking fell hounds, snarling and yelping in their eagerness to savage the intruders.

The boy stood his ground, calmly waited till the leader was but a short stone's throw distant, then set the pipe to his lips and blew a series of darting notes of so high a pitch that the old man's ears barely caught them. But the dogs did. They stopped almost dead in their tracks, for all the world as if they had run full tilt into a solid wall of glass. Next moment, the three of them were lying stretched out full

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length on the wet grass, whining, with their muzzles clasped in their forepaws and their eyes closed.

The boy played a few more notes, then walked forward and prodded the largest of the curs with his toe. The animal rolled over onto its back and offered its unguarded throat to him in a drooling ecstasy of abject submission. "You see," said the boy disdainfully. "They're such ninnies they'll even believe they're puppies."

The barking had brought a woman to the door of the farmhouse, and now she called out to the dogs. Slowly, dazedly, they rose to their feet, shook themselves and loped off towards her, pausing every so often to glance back and whimper perplexedly.

"And who might you be, strangers?"

With his spare hand the old man doffed his cap, allowing the damp breeze to flutter his white hair. "Old Peter the Tale-Spinner of Hereford, ma'am. Legging for York City. This here's young Tom, my niece's lad. We missed our way short-cutting it through Haw Gill. We'd be glad to pay silver for a night's dry lodging."

"My goodman's out timbering," responded the woman doubtfully. "I dursent say you yea or nay without he's back."

"That would be goodman Norris, I daresay, ma'am?"

"Aye," she said, screwing up her eyes to see him better. "Aye, it would."

"Then you must be Mistress Cooperson."

"Aye," she admitted. "What of it?"

"Tell me, mistress, does Old Sam's halberd still hang bright over the chimney-breast?"

The woman raised her right hand in a strange, hesitant little half-gesture of uncertainty. "You'll have been here afore then, old man?"

"Aye, ma'am. Close on twenty year since. Just agin you and young Norris wed, that would a' been." He cocked an eye up at the sagging, dripping clouds. "If me and the lad could maybe step inside your barn yonder, we'd hold it more than kind. This wet strikes a deathly chill into old bones."

The woman flushed. "No, no," she said, backing over the threshold. "Come you in here and dry yourselves by the fire. It's just me and the young lass alone, you see." Then, by way of explanation, she added: "We heard tell there was an Irish raider into Morecambe Bay afore Holymass."

"That's real kind in you, ma'am." The old man beamed, swinging the salmon down off his back and holding it out towards her. "We even thought to bring some supper with us, you see."

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"Oh, there's a wild beauty!" she exclaimed. "How came you by him?"

"Singing for our supper, you might say," said the old man winking at the boy. "I've been thinking we could maybe split master silversides longwise and perhaps smoke one half of him in your chimney overnight. That way you'll have a fine supper, and we'll have ourselves fare for our morrow's footing."

"Yes, yes," she said. "There's oak afire this minute. Do you bring him through here into the scullery." She called round over her shoulder: "Katie, lass! Come and liven up that fire right sharp!"

A blue-eyed girl of about twelve, with hair so palely blonde it was almost white, emerged from the shadows, took a long hard stare at the visitors and then vanished. The old man wiped the mud from his boots on the bundle of dried bracken piled for the purpose just inside the doorway, then carted the salmon through into the scullery and flopped it out on the slab of dark green slate which the woman indicated. She reached down a knife and a steel from a shelf and honed a rapid edge. Then with the skill of long practice she slit the fish down the belly and began scooping its insides into a wooden bucket.

The boy meanwhile had wandered through into the long stone-flagged kitchen and now stood silently watching the girl arranging dry oak billets against the smoldering back-log in the huge fireplace. She glanced at him over her shoulder. "You can blow, can't you, boy?"

He nodded, moved across and knelt beside her as she crushed dry bracken up into a ball and thrust it into the space behind the propped logs. "Well, go on then," she commanded. "Show me."

Obediently the boy leant forward and puffed till the white ashes leapt aside and exposed the glowing embers beneath. He reached out, pressed the bracken down and blew again. The kindling began to smoke. Next moment a tiny snake's tongue of flame had flickered up. He blew more gently, fanning the flame till the whole ball was well ablaze, and then he sat back on his heels and brushed the powder of ash from his cheeks and eyebrows.

The girl laid a few sticks across the flames and turned to him again. "What're you going to York for?"

"To Chapter School."

"What's that?"

"My cousin's spoken me a place in the Minster choir. He's Clerk to the Chapter."

"What'll you do?"

"Learn to read and write. Sing in the choir. Maybe play too."

"Play what? Your pipe?"

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He nodded.

She studied him long and hard by the light of the spurtling flames. "I saw what you did to the dogs," she said thoughtfully.

He smiled. "Oh, that was easy. The fish was much harder."

"You did that to the fish too? What you did to the dogs?"

"Sort of," he said.

"How do you do it?"

His smile broadened but he said nothing.

"Can I see your pipe?"

"All right." He got up, walked over to the doorway where he had left his pack, took out the pipe and brought it back to her. She held it in both hands and examined it by the firelight. Deep inside one of the tubes some crystalline facet caught the flames and twinkled like a diamond. She raised the mouthpiece to her lips and was just about to blow when he snatched the instrument from her. "No," he said. "No, you mustn't. It's tuned to me, you see."

"That's daft," she said, her cheeks flushing scarlet. "How could I hurt the silly thing?"

"I'm sorry, Katie. I can't explain it to you." He stroked his fingers in a slow caress all down the length of the pipe and then looked up at her. "You see, Morfedd made it for *me*."

"Morfedd? The Wizard of Bowness?"

"Yes."

"You *knew* him?"

The boy nodded. "Morfedd's in here," he said, lifting the pipe. "And in me."

"Who says so?"

"It's true, Katie. He chose me on my third birthnight — ten summers ago. He twinned my tongue for me. Look." His lips parted and the tip of a pink tongue slipped out between the white, even teeth. As Katie watched, fascinated, the boy's tongue tip divided, and the two halves flickered separately up and down before flicking back into his mouth. "Believe me now?" he asked and grinned at her.

The girl's blue eyes were very wide indeed. "Did it hurt?" she whispered.

"No, not much. He did it bit by bit." The boy held up the pipe and pointed to the twin air ducts. "You see he wanted me to be able to tongue them both separately," he said. "Listen."

He set the pipe to his lips and blew gently down it. Then, without moving his fingers, he sounded two gentle trills, one slow, one faster, yet both somehow intertwined and as sweetly melodious as two birds warbling in unison in a green glade of the deep forest.

Katie was utterly enraptured. She had quite forgiven him his ill-mannered snatching of the pipe.

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"Play me a tune, Tom," she begged. "Go on. Do. Please."

"All right," he agreed. "What would you like?"

"I don't know. Make one up. Just for me. Could you?"

Tom rubbed his nose with the back of his hand; then he turned slowly to face her and gazed deep into her eyes. As he did so, he seemed to go very, very still, almost as if he were listening to some sound which only he could hear. For perhaps a minute he sat thus; then he nodded once, set the pipes to his lips and began to play.

Norris and his two grown-up sons returned from the forest at dusk. Well before the others heard them Tom's sharp ears had picked up the distant jingle of traces and the squeal of wooden axles. A moment later the dogs gave tongue to a raucous chorus of welcome. Katie and her mother hustled round making the final preparations for supper while Tom and old Peter sat one on either side of the fire, steaming faintly in the drowsy warmth.

Norris was the first to enter. A thick-set, heavily bearded man with greying hair and eyes the color of an April sky. He dragged off his hooded leather tippet and slung it up onto an iron hook. Almost at once it began to drip quietly on to the flagstones beneath. "Halloa, there!" he cried. "What's this then? Company?"

Old Peter and Tom had risen at his entry, and now the old man called out: "You'll remember me, I think, Norris? Peter the Tale-Spinner. Son of Blind Hereford."

"Sweet God in Heaven!" exclaimed Norris striding to meet him. "Not the Prince of Liars in person? Aye, it's him, right enough! Welcome back, old rogue! I'd given you over for worms' meat years ago!"

They clasped forearms in the pool of yellow lamplight and shook their heads over one another. "And who's the sprig, then?" demanded Norris tipping his chin at Tom. "One of yours?"

"My niece Margot's lad. Tom by given name. Margot wed with a Stavely man. I'm taking the boy to York for her."

"York, eh? And legging it? Ah so, you shall tell us all over supper. Well met, old man. What's ours is yours. And you too, boy. Katie, wench! Is my water hot?"

He strode off towards the scullery, boisterous as the north wind, and soon they heard sounds of noisy blowing and sluicing as he swilled himself down at the stone sink. His wife came into the kitchen and clattered out wooden bowls and mugs down the long table. "He remembered you then?" she said with a smile.

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"Aye," said Peter. "I've changed less than he has, it seems. Not that he hasn't worn well, mind you." He tipped his head to one side. "How comes your lass by that barley mow of hers?"

"Bar me, all my folks are fair," she said. "Katie's eyes are her dad's though. The boys seemed to fall betwixt and between." She stepped up to the fireplace, caught up a corner of her apron, and lifted the lid of the iron cauldron which hung from a smoke-blackened chain above the flames. A rich and spicy scent floated over the hearth. She nodded, resettled the lid, and squinted up into the chimney where the other half of the salmon could be dimly seen twisting slowly back and forth in the hot air and the blue-grey woodsmoke. "Let it down again, lad," she said. "We'll souse it just once more."

Tom unhooked an end of the chain and lowered the fish till she was able to reach it. "Hold it still now," she said, and picking a brush of twigs out of a pot on the hearth, she basted the now golden flesh till it gleamed like dark honey. "Up with it, lad."

The fish vanished once more up the throat of the flue, and a few aromatic drops fell down and sizzled among the embers.

As Tom was making the chain fast, the door to the yard opened and Norris' two sons came in followed by the three dogs. The men eyed the two strangers curiously and watched without speaking as the dogs bounded up to the hearth and then ranged themselves in a grinning, hopeful semicircle round the boy, who looked down at them and laughed.

Norris appeared at the scullery door toweling his neck and bawled out introductions as though he were calling cattle in from the fells. The young men nodded and flashed their teeth in smiles of welcome. "You must have got a way with dogs, lad," observed one. "That lot don't take so kindly to strangers as a rule. They're like as not to have the arse out of your breeks."

Tom eyed the dogs and shook his head. Then Katie came in and summoned them to her. In her hand she held the wooden bucket of fish offal. She opened the yard door, stepped outside, and the dogs tumbled after her, whining eagerly.

Ten minutes later the men and the boy took their places at the long table. Katie's mother ladled out thick broth into wooden bowls, and Katie set one before each guest, then one before her father and her brothers and, last of all, one each for her mother and herself. Norris ducked his spoon and sucked up a noisy mouthful. "My women tell me we've got you to thank for this," he said to Peter.

The old man shrugged modestly

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and winked across at Tom. "You wed a fine cook, Norris," he said. "I've not tasted such a broth since I sampled your mother's."

Norris smiled. "Aye, old Mam taught Annie a thing or two afore she went. How to bear strong men for a start. Now tell us some news, old-timer. Is it true there's a new king in Wales?"

"Aye. Dyfydd, men call him. They say he's a fierce and cunning fighter."

"That's as may be, but can he keep the peace? Hold off the Paddys? Hey?"

"Maybe. Along the west border there was talk of him laying court to Eileen of Belfast — King Kerrigan's widow. That might do it — if he pulls it off."

"The sooner the better," said Norris, reaching out and tearing a ragged lump from the wheaten loaf before him. "You heard they'd fired Lancaster castle?"

"There's no truth in that story, Norris. They were held at Morecambe and hanged at Preston."

"Is that a fact?"

"I did a two-day telling in Lancaster myself a month back. On my way up to Kendal. By the time we leg it into York, I daresay folk will be telling us the Paddys hold everything west of the Pennines."

Norris laughed. "Aye. If cows grew like rumors, we'd none of us lack for beef."

Peter smiled and nodded. "Are you still under Northumberland's shield here?"

"For what it's worth. The last border patrol we saw was nigh on a year back, and they were a right bunch of thieves. No, the only time his Lordship wants to know about us is at the Mid-Summer Tax Harvest. Our trouble here is that there aren't enough of us freeholders to make up more than a token force. And we're spread too thin. The Paddys could pick us off one by one if they'd a mind to, and none of the rest of us would be a wit the wiser till it was too late. It's our luck there's not much up here they're likely to fancy."

"You've not been troubled then?"

"Nothing to speak of."

The younger son glanced round at his brother and murmured something too low for Peter to catch.

"Poachers?" Peter asked.

"We had a spot of bother a year or two back. That's all settled now. Let's have some more beer here, Katie, lass!"

The girl brought a huge stone jug and refilled her father's mug. "Dad *killed* one of them," she said to Peter. "With his ax. You did, didn't you, Dad?"

"It was them or us," said Norris. "Don't think I'm proud of it."

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"Well, *I* am," said Katie stoutly.

Norris laughed and gave her a cheerful wallop on the behind. "Well, it seems to have taught them a lesson," he said. "We've not been troubled since. Now tell us how the world's been treating you, Tale-Spinner."

"Never better than this," said Peter taking a long pull at his beer. "I crossed the narrow seas, lived a while in France and Italy. Joined up with a Greek juggler and voyaged with him to the Americas. Made some money and lost it. Came home to die two years ago. That's about it, Norris. Nothing you've any call to envy me for."

"You've never felt you wanted to settle, then?"

"It's not so much a question of *wanting*, Norris; more a question of *royals*. Some can save money; some can't. Mind you, I'll not say I haven't had my chances. I was three whole years in one town in Italy. Still got connections there, in a manner of speaking. But I'll not be putting to sea again. These bones will lie in the Fifth Kingdom. All I'm waiting for now is to see the millennium out."

Katie's mother spooned out steaming portions of rosy fish onto the wooden platters, piled potatoes and onions around them, and passed them down the table. Norris stretched out and helped himself liberally to salt. "And just what's so special about the year 3000?" he demanded. "A year's a year, and that's all there is to it. Numbers aren't worth a pig's turd."

"Ah, now, if you'll pardon me for saying so, Norris, there you're mistaken. The fact is, the world's grown to expect something remarkable of 3000 A.D. And if enough people get to expecting something, then like enough it'll come to pass."

"Peace and Brotherhood, you mean? The White Bird of Kinship and all that froth? I just wish someone would have a go at telling it to the Paddys and the Jocks."

"Ah, but they believe in it too, Norris."

"Oh, they do, do they?" Norris snorted. "It's the first I've heard of it. If you ask me, the only time the Jocks and the Paddys are likely to fall on anyone's neck is when they've got a broadsword to hand."

"There'll be a sign," said Peter. "That's how it'll be."

"A sign, eh? What sort of sign?"

"Some speak of a comet or a silver sky ship like they had in the Old Times. In Italy there was talk of a new star so bright you'll be able to see it in the day sky."

"And what do you think?"

"Well, they could be right, Norris. Stranger things have happened."

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"No doubt. And telling people about them has kept your old belly nicely lined, eh?"

"Someone has to do it."

"Oh, I'm not belittling you, old-timer. In truth, I sometimes think we need more like you. Faith, it's a poor look out for folks if they can see no more to life than scratching for food and working up their appetite for it by killing their fellow men." He waved his knife at Tom. "What do you say, boy?"

Tom swallowed his mouthful and nodded his head. "Yes, sir," he said. "There *is* more than that."

"Bravely said, lad! Well, go on, tell us about it."

"Peter's right, sir. About the White Bird, I mean. It *is* coming."

"Oh, yes?" said Norris, winking at Peter. "What'll it be like, son?"

"I mean for some of us it's here *already*, sir," said Tom. "We can hear it *now*. It's in everything — all about us — everywhere. That's what I thought you meant, sir."

Norris blinked at him and rolled his tongue pensively around his teeth. Then he nodded his head slowly. "Well, now, maybe I did at that," he said. "Not that I'd have thought to put it just so myself."

"Tom's a piper, Dad," said Katie. "He plays better than anyone I've ever heard."

"Is that a fact?" said Norris. "Then after supper we'll have to see if we can't persuade him to give us a tune. How about it, lad?"

"Gladly, sir."

"Good," said Norris, stabbing a fork into his food and turning back to Peter. "You use him in your tellings, do you?"

"Not so far," said the old man. "But the thought crossed my mind just this afternoon. There's no denying he's got a real gift for the pipes. What do you say, Tom, lad? Fancy coming into partnership?"

"I thought you were supposed to be taking him to the Chapter School at York," said Katie's mother with an edge to her voice that was not lost on Peter.

"Why, to be sure I am, ma'am," he said. "We're legging by way of Sedbergh and Aysgarth. Aiming to strike York for Christmas. That's so, isn't it, Tom?"

The boy nodded.

"I was hoping to make a start two weeks ago, but I got an invitation to a telling in Carlisle which held me back." The old man cocked a ragged eyebrow towards Katie's mother. "I seem to recall you to be a native of Aysgarth, ma'am."

"You've got a fine memory, Tale-Spinner."

"I was thinking that maybe you would like us to carry some message to your folks for you?"

"You'd have to leg a deal further than Aysgarth to do it, old

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man," she said and smiled wanly. "They're dead and gone long since."

"Is that so? Well, indeed I'm truly sorry to hear it."

"It happens," she said.

Supper over, Norris tapped a small cask of strong ale, drew it off into a substantial earthenware jug, added sliced apple and a fragrant lump of crushed honeycomb, then stood the mixture down on the hearth to mull. By the time Tom had finished helping Katie and her mother to clear the table and wash the dishes, the warm ale was giving off a drowsy scent which set an idle mind wandering dreamily down the long-forgotten hedgerows of distant summers.

They settled themselves in a semicircle round the hearth; the lamp was trimmed and turned low, and old Peter set about earning his night's lodging. Having fortified himself with a draught of ale, he launched himself into a saga set in the days before the Drowning when the broad skies were a universal highway and, by means of strange skills, long since forgotten, men and women could sit snug and cosy by their own firesides and see in their magic mirrors things which were happening at that very instant on the other side of the world.

Like all good stories there was some love in it and much adventure; hardship, breathtaking coincidence and bloody slaughter; and finally, of course, a happy ending. Its hero, the young Prince Amulet, having discovered that his noble father the King of Denmark has been murdered by a wicked brother who has usurped the throne, sets out to avenge the crime. Peter's description of the epic duel fought out between uncle and nephew with swords whose blades were beams of lethal light, held Norris and his family open-mouthed and utterly spell-bound. Not for nothing was the son of Blind Hereford known throughout the Seven Kingdoms as "the Golden-Tongued."

When the victorious Prince and his faithful Princess had finally been escroted to their nuptial chamber through a fanfare of silver trumpets, the enchanted listeners broke into spontaneous applause and begged Peter for another. But the Tale-Spinner was too old and wise a bird to be caught so easily. Pleading that his throat was bone dry, he reminded them that young Tom had agreed to favor them with a tune or two.

"Aye, come along, lad," said Norris. "Let's have a taste of that whistle of yours."

While Tom was fetching his instrument from his pack, Katie made a round of the circle and replenished the mugs. Then she

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settled herself at her father's knee. The boy sat down cross-legged on the fire-warmed flagstones and waited till everyone was still.

He had played scarcely a dozen notes when there was a sound of frantic scratching at the yard door and a chorus of heart-rending whimpers. Tom broke off and grinned up at Norris. "Shall I let them in?"

"I will," said Katie and was up and away before Norris had a chance to say either yes or no.

The dogs bounded into the kitchen, tails waving ecstatically and headed straight for the boy. He blew three swift, lark-high notes, pointed to the hearth before him, and meek as mice they stretched themselves out at his feet. He laughed, leant forward and tapped each animal on its nose with his pipe "Now you behave yourselves, dogs," he said, "or I'll scare your tails off."

Katie regained her place and he began to play once more. He had chosen a set of familiar country dances and, within seconds, he had feet tapping and hands clapping all around the circle. It was almost as if the listeners were unable to prevent their muscles from responding to the imperious summons of his jigs and reels. Even Old Peter found his toes twitching and his fingers drumming out the rhythms on the wooden arm of the inglenook settle.

With the flamelight flickering elvishly in his grey-green eyes Tom swung them from tune to tune with an effortless dexterity that would surely have been the envy of any professional four times his age, and when he ended with a sustained trill which would not have shamed a courting blackbird, his audience showered praise upon him.

"Blest if ever I heard better piping!" cried Norris. "Who taught you such skills, lad?"

"Morfedd the Wizard did," said Katie. "That's right, isn't it, Tom?"

Tom nodded, staring ahead of him into the flames.

"Morfedd of Bowness, eh" said Norris. "Me, I never met him. But I recall how in Kendal the folk used to whisper that he'd stored up a treasurehouse of wisdom from the Old Times and Lord knows what else beside. How came he to teach you piping, lad?"

"He came for me on my third birthnight," said Tom. "He'd heard me playing a whistle up on the fells, and he bespoke my mum and dad for me." He raised his head and looked round at Norris. "After Morfedd died," he said, "I composed a lament for him. Would you like to hear it?"

"Aye, lad. That we would. Whenever you're ready."

Then Tom did a strange thing.

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He gripped the pipe in both hands, one at either end, and held it out at arm's length in front of him. Then, very slowly, he brought it back towards his chest, bent his head over it and seemed to be murmuring something to it. It was a strangely private little ritual of dedication that made all those who saw it wonder just what kind of a child this was. Next moment he had set the pipe to his lips, closed his eyes and turned his soul adrift.

To their dying day none of those present ever forgot the next ten minutes, and yet no two of them ever recalled it alike. But all were agreed on one thing. The boy had somehow contrived to take each of them, as it were, by the hand and lead them back to some private moment of great sadness in their own lives, so that they felt again, deep in their own hearts, all the anguish of an intense but long-forgotten grief. For most the memory was of the death of someone dearly loved, but for young Katie it was different and was somehow linked with some exquisite quality she sensed within the boy himself — something which carried with it an almost unbearable sense of terrible loss. Slowly it grew within her, swelling and swelling till in the end, unable to contain it any longer, she burst into wild sobs and buried her face in her father's lap.

Tom's fingers faltered on the stops, and those listening who were still capable of doing so, noticed that his own cheeks were wet with tears. He drew in a great, slow, shuddering breath, then, without saying a word, got up and walked away into the shadows by the door. One by one the dogs rose to their feet and padded after him. Having restored his pipe to its place within his pack, he opened the door and stepped outside into the night.

It was a long time before anyone spoke, and when they did, what was said was oddly inconsequential: Norris repeating dully, "Well, I dunno, I dunno, I dunno," and Old Peter muttering what sounded like a snatch from one of his own stories — "And the angel of Grief moved invisible among them and their tears fell like summer rain." Only Katie's mother was moved to remark: "He'll not carry such a burden for long, I think," though, had anyone thought to ask her, she would have been hard put to explain what she meant, or even why she had said it.

During the night the wind shifted into a new quarter. It came whistling down, keen and chill from the Northern Cheviots, until the dawn sky, purged at last of cloud, soared ice-blue and fathomless above the forest and the fells.

A bare half hour after sunup Old Peter and Tom had said their

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farewells and were on their way. Katie accompanied them to the top of the valley to set them on their path. She pointed to a white rock on the crest of a distant hill and told them that from there they would be able to sight Sedbergh spire. The old man thanked her and said he'd be sure to call and see her again when he was next in the district.

"You may be," she said, "but he won't. I know," and turning to Tom she took from the pocket of her cloak a small, flat, green pebble, washed smooth by the river. A hole had been drilled in the center, and through it a leather lace was threaded. "That's for my song," she said. "Keep it. It may bring you luck."

Tom nodded, slid the thong over his head and slipped the talisman down inside his jerkin where it lay cool as a water drop against his chest. "Good-by, Katie," he said.

He did not look back until they were well down the track, and then he saw her still standing there on the hilltop with the wind streaming out her long hair into a misty golden halo. He raised his arm in salute. She waved back, briefly, and the next moment she had turned and vanished in the direction of the hidden farm.

They stopped to eat shortly before noon, choosing the shelter of an outcrop of rock close to where a spring bubbled. The sun struck warm on to their backs even though, but a few paces from where they sat, the wind still hissed drearily through the dry bracken bones. Old Peter broke in two the flat scone which Katie's mother had given them and then divided one of the halves into quarters. He sliced off two substantial lumps of the smoked salmon and handed bread and meat to the boy.

For a few minutes they both chewed away in silence. Then Peter said, "I'd been thinking of trying our luck at Sedbergh Manor, but maybe we'd do better at the inn. There's a chance we'll strike up acquaintence with a carrier and get ourselves a lift up to Aysgarth. Better ride than leg, eh?"

"Whatever you say," agreed Tom.

The old man nodded sagely. "If luck's with us there's no reason we shouldn't pick up a royal or two into the bargain. Between the two of us, I mean. Reckon we could milk it out of them, eh?"

Tom glanced across at him but said nothing.

"You've never thought of roading for a living then, lad?"

"No."

"Ah, it's the only life if you've got the talent for it. Blast, but we two'd make a splendid team! Think of legging the high road

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through the Seven Kingdoms! York, Derby, Norwich, London. New towns, new faces! Why, we could even duck it across the French seas an' we'd a mind to! Taste the salt spray on our lips and see the silver sails swell like a sweetheart's bosom! How's that strike you as fare for a spring morning, lad?"

Tom smiled. "But I thought you said you weren't going to go to sea again."

"Ah, well, that was just a *facon de parler* as they say across the water. But with you along it would be different. We could work up a proper act, see? You'd feel your way into the mood of each tale, and then, with that pipe of yours, you'd come drifting in along o' the words like a feather on the tide. Between the two of us we'd reach right down through their ears and tickle their pockets. Blast it, Tom lad, I tell you you've got a touch of magic in those finger ends of yours — a gift like nobody's business! You don't want to chuck all that away while you choke yourself to death on Minster dust! A dower like yours cries out to be shared! You owe it to the Giver of Gifts! Out there on the wide high road you'll be as free as the wind and the birds of the air! Up and off! Over the hills and far away!"

Tom laughed. "But I *am* free. Morfedd taught me that. He unlocked something inside me and let it fly out. Besides, I want to learn how to read and write."

"Pooh, there's nothing to letters, Tom. I'll teach you myself. And more besides! There's only one school for the likes of us, lad. The great high road. Once you've begun to turn the pages of that book, you'll never want another."

"And mum? What would she think? After she's taken all that trouble to bespeak Cousin Seymour for me?"

"Ah, your heart does you credit, lad. Real credit. But I know my Mistress Margot. Been dreaming up plans for you, hasn't she? How maybe you'll catch the Bishop's eye and gain a preference and so on and so forth? Isn't that it? Ah, that's just a mother's daydreams, Tom. Believe you me, lad, the only way to preference in York Chapter for a boy like you is up the back stairs and onto the choirmaster's pallet. Faith, I tried to tell her so, but she wouldn't listen. Said your Cousin Seymour would shield you from anything of that sort. But I know the ways of the world and —"

"People become what you think them, Peter."

"Eh? How's that?"

"Morfedd said so. He said our thoughts are unseen hands shaping the people we meet. Whatever we truly think them to be, that's what they'll become for us."

The old man stared at him,

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wondering if the Kendal gossips had spoken true and the boy really *was* touched. "Oh, he did, did he?" he said at last. "And what else did he say?"

"Morfedd? Oh, lots of things."

"Well, go on, lad. Let's hear one."

Tom rubbed his nose with the back of his hand and stared out across the hillside. "He used to say that seeing things as they *really* are is the most difficult seeing of all. He said people only see what they want to see, not what really is."

"Aye, well, I'm not saying he doesn't have a point there. But I'll warrant he didn't think to tell you how to recognize this truth when you do see it."

"You don't *see* it exactly. You *feel* it."

"And just how's that supposed to help someone like me who lives by his lying? Didn't you know they call me the 'Prince of Liars'?"

Tom grinned. "Oh, that's different," he said. "Your stories are like my music. They tell a different kind of truth. People hear it in their hearts."

"Blast it, boy, you have an answer pat for everything! Look here, I'll tell you what. From now till Christmastide we'll work the road twixt here and York — Leyburn, Masham, Ripon and Boroughbridge — finishing up at The Duke's Arms in Selby Street. That way you'll get a fair taste of the life I'm offering. Then if you're still set on the Chapter School, why that's all there is to it. Till then, you'll have a third-part share in all we take. That strike you as fair?"

"All right," said Tom. "But you must tell me what you want me to do."

"Done!" cried Peter. "We'll set it up while we're legging down to Sedbergh. Have you done with eating? Right then, partner, let's be on our way."

It soon emerged that the book of the open road which Peter had recommended to Tom with such enthusiasm contained at least one chapter which he himself had never read. By the third week of December when they reached Boroughbridge he found that rumor, racing ahead like a fell fire, had brought scores of curious people riding into town from as far afield as Harrogate and Easingwold. And the rumors were extraordinary. Even Peter whose life's philosophy was based on seizing fortune by the forelock and never looking a gift horse in the mouth, was genuinely bewildered by them. They seemed to bear no relation whatsoever to the facts which were, as he saw them, that a pair of troupers were working the road down to York for the Christmastide fair. What in the

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name of the Giver of Gifts could that have to do with any White Bird of Kinship? Yet there was no escaping the fact that it was this which was bringing these credulous country folk flocking in.

Nor was that all. Getting a quarter out of a fell farmer was usually about as easy as pulling his teeth with your bare hands; yet here they were showering their silver into his hat as though it was chaff, and none of them thinking to dip a hand in after it either. Over a hundred royal they'd taken in three weeks, not to mention the new suit apiece that dimwitted tailor in Leyburn had insisted on making for them, refusing even a penny piece for his labor. Why, at this rate, in six months he'd have enough put by for that little pub in Kendal he'd always hankered after. Six months? A bare *three* at the pace things were going! Sure Tom couldn't grudge him that. Meanwhile, here was the landlord of The Bull fingering his greasy cowlick and trusting they would favor him with their esteemed custom. No question of *paying*! It would be his privilege. And the inn yard with its gallery would surely be ideal for their performance. It could accommodate three hundred with ease — three fifty at a pinch. The venerable Tale-Spinner had only to give word, and the news would be all round the town before the church clock had struck the hour.

"All right, landlord," said Peter magnanimously. "But it'll cost you two royals."

The landlord blenched, made a rapid mental calculation, and agreed.

"Two a *night*," said Peter imperturbably. "For the two nights."

A slightly longer pause followed by a nod of grudging acquiescence.

"And I'll have half in advance."

"There's my hand on it," said the landlord, and suited the action to the word.

A wall-eyed serving wench showed them up to their room, which overlooked the inn yard. "There's a spread of clean linen," she informed them shyly, "and coals to the fire. Would you like that I fetch you a bit to eat?"

"Aye, lass. A meat pasty. And a jug of hot punch to help it down."

She bobbed a half curtsy and ducked out. Tom, who had wandered over to the window, observed that it looked as if it was going to snow.

"More than like," said Old Peter, rubbing his hands briskly and stretching them out to the flames. "Aren't we due a few feathers from the White Bird?" He snorted tolerantly. "Can you make head or tail of it?"

Tom breathed on to the glass before him and drew an upside

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down 3. "I think it's like you said to Norris. People *want* to believe it. They're tired of feeling afraid."

"But what's that got to do with *us*, lad?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, I'll not deny you play very pretty pipe and I tell a stirring enough tale, but what kind of sparks are they to set this sort of kindling ablaze? I tell you true, Tom, if it wasn't that we're coining money hand over fist, I'd be sorely tempted to turn around and head right back to Kendal. I don't like the smell of it one bit."

Tom moved away from the window and wandered back to the fire. "There's nothing to be afraid of," he said. "I think we should go along with it."

"Go along with what?"

"Well, tell them the story of the White Bird. You could, couldn't you?"

"And have the crows about my neck? You must be out of your mind?"

"But Morfedd said —"

"'Morfedd said'! That joker said a deal too much for your good, if you ask me! The sooner you start putting him behind you, the better for the both of us. Oh, I don't mean to belittle him, lad, but we aren't in the back of beyond now, you know. Down here they're more touchy about such things than they are along the Borders. And York ...."

Tom regarded the old man pensively. "I've been making up a tune to go with the White Bird," he said. "It's not finished yet. Would you like to hear it?"

"I suppose there's no harm. So long as it's without words. But what put that idea into your head?"

"I'm not really sure. The first bit came to me just after we left Katie. When I looked back and saw her standing there on top of the hill. Since then, I've been joining things onto it. I've been using some of them for *Amulet*. That scene where the Prince meets his father's ghost is one. And there's another bit later on when he believes Princess Lorelia has been drowned. The last bit I made up at Ripon when you were telling *The Three Brothers*. Don't you remember?"

"To be honest, lad, I can't say as I do. The fact is, when I'm stuck into a tale I don't hear much above the sound of my own words. I'm hearing it and telling it at the same time. Seeing it too. In a bit of a dream, I suppose you might say. Maybe that's why my tellings never come out word for word the same. Not even *Amulet*. And, blast me, if I had a silver quarter for every time I've spun *that* yarn, there wouldn't be a richer man in Boroughbridge!"

Tom laughed. "And has it always had a happy ending?"

"*Amulet*? Aye. The way I tell it.

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My old dad would have the Prince dying at the end. But that cuts too close to life for my taste."

"The White Bird dies too, doesn't it?"

"Look, do me a favor, will you, lad? Just forget about that Holy Chicken. Leastways till we're shot of York. Down south in Norwich we'll like enough get away with it, tho' even there it could still be a bit risky."

Tom, who had taken up his pipe, now lowered it to his lap. "But we're not going to Norwich," he said. "Just to York. That's what we agreed, wasn't it?"

"Aye, so it was," said Peter easily. "The fact is, Tom, I've grown so used to having you along I can't think of it being any other way. Tell me straight now, hasn't this past month been a fair old frolic? Remember that flame-headed wench at Masham, eh? Blast me but she was properly taken with you! And yon whistle wasn't the only pipe she was pining for neither! I tell you that between us we've got it made, lad! Stick with me and I swear that six months from now you'll be taking such a bag of royals home to you mam as'll topple her on the floor in a fit! You *can't* just let it drop now!"

Tom raised his pipe and slowly lowered his head above it as Peter had seen him do once before in the farmhouse kitchen. For a full minute he said nothing at all, then: "I must go to York, Peter. I must."

"Well, and so you shall. Show me him as says otherwise. We struck hands on it, remember? 'Sides I had word only this morning from Jack Rayner at The Duke's Arms that he's looking to us for Friday. The way I've planned it we'll just work out the Christmas fair, and then you'll trot round and pay your respects to your Cousin Seymour at the Chapter House. You can't say fairer than that, can you?"

"Tom nodded. "I'm sorry," he said. "I really am, Peter. I think you're the finest storyteller that ever was. Listening to you is like sharing in a golden dream. But, you see, I promised Morfedd I'd go to York, and I can't break my promise."

"*Morfedd?* What's he got to do with it? I thought this was all Mistress Margot's idea."

"She thinks so," said Tom. "But really it was Morfedd. He planned it years ago. Long before he chose me. Before I was even *born*. It was a secret between us."

"I'm not with you, lad. Planned *what*? That you should get yourself schooled in York Chapter? Is that supposed to make sense?"

"Oh, that's nothing to do with it. I just have to be in York at Christmas. For the forthcoming."

"Blast it, boy, why must you

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speak in riddles? What 'Forthcoming'?'"

Tom lifted his head and gazed into the flickering coals. Then in a gentle singsong he recited: *"The first coming was the man; the second was fire to burn him; the third was water to drown the fire; and the fourth is the Bird of Dawning."* So saying he took up his pipe and began to play very softly.

It seemed to the old man that the tune came drifting to him from somewhere far away like the voice of a young girl he had once heard singing on the far side of a twilit lake high up in the Apennines, strange and sweetly clear and so magical that he had scarcely dared to breathe lest he should miss a note of it. He closed his eyes, surrendered himself wholly to the enchantment.

At once there began to drift across his inward eye a series of guttering pictures that were not quite real and yet were more than mere daydreams, memories almost, of not quite forgotten moments woven into the long tapestry of years that had gone to make up his life; instants when, wholly in spite of himself, he had seemed about to reach out towards something that was at once so simple and yet so profound that he just could not bring himself to accept it. And yet it *could* be grasped because it was not outside him but within him; a vision of what might be, as when he, and he alone, by stretching out an arm in thought could wrest the deadly weapon from the Uncle's hand and grant Prince Amulet life. The power was his — was *anyone's* — was ....

The thread of the melody snapped. Peter's eyes blinked open, and the room seemed to rock into stillness around him. He felt his cloudy identity distill itself like mist on a windowpane and trickle downwards in slow, sad drops. There was a *tap-tap* at the door, and, to Tom's summons, in came the serving girl bearing a tray on which was a jug and two earthenware cups and the steaming pasty which Peter had ordered. She set it down on a stool before the fire, then turned to where the boy was sitting on the edge of the bed. "It's true what they're saying," she whispered. "I stood outside the door and listened. I was feared to come in while you was a-playin'."

Tom grinned at her. "What *are* they saying?" he asked.

"That the White Bird's a-coming. It is, isn't it?"

"Do *you* think so?"

"Aye, young master," she said. "I do *now*."

The night before they were due to leave for York, there was a heavy frost. The landlord of The Bull lit some charcoal braziers in the yard,

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and Peter and Tom gave their final performance at Boroughbridge under a sky in which the stars seemed to quiver like dewdrops in an April cobweb. Peter was perched up on a rough dais made of planks and barrels, and Tom sat cross-legged at his feet. As the recital was drawing to its close, the old man caught sight of a figure slipping away from the outer fringe of the crowd. Lamplight gleamed briefly on polished metal, and, a minute later, Peter's alerted ears caught the brisk and receding clatter of iron-shod hoofs on cobblestones.

Later, while settling accounts with the landlord, he enquired casually whether any "crows" had been pecking around.

The landlord glanced quickly about him, saw that they were unobserved, and murmured, "Aye, there was one."

"Happen you know what he was seeking?"

"Not I," said the landlord. "He asked nowt of me."

Peter took a bright gold half-royal out of his purse and laid it on the table between them. With his extended fingertip he nudged it delicately an inch or two towards his host. "Flown in from York, I daresay?"

The man's eyes swiveled away from the coin and then back as though tethered by an invisible thread. "Aye, most like," he said.

"And home to roost by starlight," mused Peter, coaxing the coin back towards himself again. "I wonder what sort of song he'll be croaking in the Minster?"

The landlord leant across the table and beckoned Peter closer by a tiny jerk of the head. "Know you aught of the White Bird of Kinship, old Tale-Spinner?" he whispered.

Peter clucked his tongue, chiding ironically. "Did you think to speak heresy with me, landlord?"

"'Twas you that asked, and that's the carrion the crows are pecking for. They've smelt it blowing down strong from the hills these twelve months past. Don't tell me you've not heard the talk."

"Aye. Some to be sure. Along the Borders."

The landlord shook his head. "No longer. It's in the open now. Seems even the field mice have got bold all of a sudden. Me, I keep my thoughts to myself."

"So you'll live to raise wise grandsons like yourself," said Peter, nodding approval. He tapped the coin with his fingernail. "Was that one I saw asking after us?"

"Aye, he was. Where you hailed from. Wither bound."

"And you told him, of course."

"Not I. But anyone with ears in Boroughbridge could have done so. You've not kept it any close secret."

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"That's true. Well, I'm obliged to you, landlord. The boy and I have a mind to ride horseback the rest of our way. Can you manage us two hacks to The Duke's Arms in Selby Street?"

"I can that, and gladly," said the landlord, quite at his ease once more. "A quarter apiece they'll cost you."

Peter nodded, opened his purse once more, joined a second half-royal to the first and pushed them across the tabletop. "You'll not be out of pocket by our stay, I think."

The landlord shrugged and pocketed the coins. "They weren't an overthirsty lot, but there were plenty of them."

That night the old tale-spinner's dreams were troubled by shapes of vague ill-boding, but the shadows they east soon lifted next morning as he urged his hired horse at a trot out of Boroughbridge along the ancient road to York. Frosty icing glittered as the early sunlight splintered off diamond sparks from the hedgerow twigs; frozen puddles crackled briskly beneath the clopping hooves, and breath of horse and rider snorted up in misty plumes along the eager nipping air.

"Hey, Tom, lad!" Peter called back over his shoulder. "How's it feel to be entering York in style? This is the life, eh? Beats legging any day!"

Tom shook his own nag into an arthritic canter and eventually lumbered up alongside. "No one can hear us out here, can they, Peter?"

"What about it?"

"There's something I've been wanting to ask you."

"Well, go ahead, lad. Ask away."

"It's about the White Bird."

A light seemed to go out in Peter's eye. He sighed. "Well, go on, if you must," he said. "Get it off your chest."

"Just before he died Morfedd told me that the Bird *will* come down and drive the fear out of men's hearts. But he didn't say *how*. Do you know, Peter?"

"I thought I'd made it pretty clear what I think, Tom. Why don't you just let it alone, lad?"

"But you know the story, Peter."

"I know how it *ends*," said the old man grimly.

"The other bird, you mean?"

"Aye, lad. The Black Bird. Me, I prefer my stories to have happy endings."

Tom rode for a while in silence considering this. "Maybe it *was* a happy ending," he said at last.

"Not the way I heard it, it wasn't."

"Then maybe we should all hear it different," said Tom. "Perhaps that's what Morfedd

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meant. He said true happiness was simply not being afraid of anyone at all. He called it the last secret."

"Did he, indeed? Well, let me tell you I'm a great respecter of Lord Fear. That's how I've lived so long. If you want to do the same, you'd better start by speeding all thoughts of the White Bird clear out of your mind — or into your pipe if you must. I've more than a suspicion we'll find plenty of ears in York ready pricked for heresy and plenty of tongues ready to run tattle with it. It's a dangerous time to be dreaming of the White Bird of Kinship, Tom. Have I made myself plain enough?"

"Aye, that you have," said Tom and laughed cheerfully.

As they clattered over Hammerton Bridge, a solitary horseman dressed in doublet and breeches of black leather, wearing a studded steel casque, and with a lethal-looking metal crossbow slung across his shoulder, emerged from behind a clump of trees and came cantering after them. "Good morrow, strangers," he hailed them civilly. "You ride to York?"

"Aye, sir," said Peter. "To York it is."

"For the Fairing, no doubt."

Peter nodded.

"You buy or sell?"

The old man doffed his cap. "Both, sir. Old Peter of Hereford, Tale-Spinner. At your service."

"Well met indeed, then!" cried the bowman. "How better to pass an hour than by sampling your goods, Old Peter. And the lad? Does he sing, or what?"

"He pipes a burden to my tales, sir."

"A piper too, eh? Truly fortune beams upon me." The stranger drew back his lips in a smile, but his eyes remained as cold and still as slate pebbles on a river bed. "So, what have we on offer?"

Peter rubbed his chin and chuckled. "On such a morning as this what could suit better than a frisky love story?"

"Nay, nay, old man! I fear you might set me on so hard my saddle would come sore. I'll have none of your rutty nonsense. In truth my tastes are of a different order. Inclined more towards the fable you might say." The smile was gone as though wiped from his face with a cloth. "I'll have The White Bird of Kinship, Tale-Spinner, and none other."

Peter frowned. "Faith, sir, I'm famed to know a tale for every week I've lived, but that's a new one on me. No doubt I have it by some other name. That happens sometimes. If you could, perhaps, prompt me ...."

"We'll let the lad do that for us, old rogue. Come, sprat! Put your master on the right road!"

Tom smelt old Peter's fear,

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rank as stale sweat, and felt a quick stab of pity for the old man. He looked across at the bowman and smiled and shook his head. "I do have an old hill tune of that calling, sir. But it has no words to it that I know. If you wish I can finger it for you." And without waiting for a reply he looped his reins over his pommel, dipped into his knapsack and took out his pipe.

The bowman watched, sardonic and unblinking, as the boy first set the mouthpiece to his lips, then turned his head so that he was facing the newcomer directly across the forequarters of Peter's horse. Their glances met, locked, and, at the very instant of eye contact, the boy began to play.

Whiteness exploded in the man's mind. For an appalling instant he felt the very fabric of the world rending apart. Before his eyes the sun was spinning like a crazy golden top; glittering shafts of light leapt up like sparkling spears from hedgerow and hilltop; and all about his head the air was suddenly awash with the slow, majestic beating of huge, invisible wings. He felt an almost inexpressible urge to send a wild hosanna of joy fountaining upwards in welcome, while, at the same time, his heart was melting within him. He had become a tiny infant rocked in a warm cradle of wonder and borne aloft by those vast unseen pinions, up and up to join the blossoming radiance of the sun. And then, as suddenly as it had come, it was over; he was back within himself again, conscious only of a sense of desperate loss — of an enormous insatiable yearning.

The bowman sat astride his horse like one half-stunned, the reins drooping from his nerveless fingers, while the old man turned to the boy and whispered, "What in the name of mercy have you done to him? He looks like a sleepwalker."

Tom ran his strange forked tongue across his upper lip. "I thought of him like I think of the dogs," he murmured, "not as a man at all. Perhaps he *wanted* to believe me. Do you know who he is?"

"Aye. He's a Falcon. Each Minster has a brood of them. They have a swift and deadly stoop. I glimpsed one of them at the telling last night." He turned back with a broad guileless smile to the bowman. "Well, sir," he cried cheerfully, "now you've sampled the lad's skill, how about a taste of mine? Myself I'm in the mood for a good spicy wenching tale, if you're agreeable?"

The man nodded abstractedly, and the old storyteller launched himself without further ado into a tale of lechery whose bones had been creaking long before Rome was young and yet which, for all its

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antiquity, lacked neither spirit nor flavor.

By the time the last score had been settled, the last knot tied, the three riders were within a strong bowshot of the city walls. Peter reined up his horse and doffed his hat with a fine flourish. "Your servant, sir," he said. "And may your nights be as lively as my tale."

The man reached absently towards the purse that hung at his belt, but the old man stopped him with a lordly gesture. "Your personal recommendation is all we crave, sir," he said. "We come to work the Fair."

"So you shall have it," said the bowman. "I give you the word of Gyre." He stood up in his stirrups and looked back along the road they had ridden as though he were searching for something he could no longer see. Finally he shook his head, turned back, and, glancing at Tom, said, "I'm sorry I didn't get to hear your piping, lad. Some other time, eh?"

Tom nodded and smiled and patted the neck of his horse.

In brief salute the bowman touched his left shoulder with his clenched right fist. "Well met, then," he said. He shook his reins, kicked his heels into his horse's flanks and cantered off towards the west gate of the city.

As they watched him go, Peter muttered uneasily, "Was that his idea of a joke, d'you think?"

"No," said Tom. "He meant it."

"But he can't have *forgotten*."

"I think he has," said Tom. "He remembers *something*, but he's not sure whether we had anything to do with it. Didn't you see him looking back along the road? Perhaps he thinks I offered to play for him and he refused."

"And he *won't* remember?"

"I don't think so. Not unless I want him to."

"I once knew a man in Italy who could entrance people," said Peter. "But he did it with words."

Tom nodded. "Morfedd could do that too."

"He did it to you, did he?"

"Often."

"And how do *you* do it?"

"I tell them too — only without words."

"Tell them what?"

Tom looked into the old man's eyes and smiled faintly. "I told *him* about the White Bird," he said. "He wanted to believe me, so it was easy."

Peter stared at him. "Do you *know* how you do it?"

"I know when someone wants me to!"

"But *how*, lad? What is it you *do*?"

Tom sighed faintly. "I join myself to them. I build a bridge and walk to them over it. I take their

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thoughts and give them back my own." He glanced at Peter and then away again. "One day I'll do it for everyone, not just one or two."

"And Morfedd taught you that, did he?"

"He taught me how to find the right keys. A different one for each person. But I believe there's a master key, Peter. One to unlock the whole world. I call that key The White Bird."

Peter shook his head slowly. "Well I'm scarcely wiser than I was before, but I'm mighty glad you did it. I had an ill vision of the two of us lying spitted at the roadside like a couple of sparrows. That little toy he carries at his back can put a bolt clean through an oak door at thirty paces."

Tom laughed. "I liked the story anyway."

The old man treated him to an enormous wink. "Come on, lad!" he cried. "We're still alive, so let's make the most of it! My throat's as dry as a brick oven." Slapping his horse's haunch with the reins, he led the way into the city.

York was the first city that Tom had ever laid eyes on. As soon as he had recovered from his initial astonishment, he found it put him irresistibly in mind of an ancient oak that grew on a hillside near his home in Bowness. Known locally as "the Wizard's Oak" this once lordly tree had been completely shattered by lightning and given up for dead. Then, a year later, it had begun to generate a few leafy shoots and, within ten years, had become a respectable living tree again. Now as he wandered about the bustling streets and squares and nosed into the dark alleys, Tom's sharp eyes picked out the dead skeleton branches of ancient York still standing amidst the new, and he found himself wondering about the race of men, long since dead and forgotten, who had erected these incredible buildings. He even conceived the odd notion that the builders must themselves have been shaped differently from ordinary men and women, not rounded but squared off and pared to sharp edges, as if their gods had first drawn them out on a plan with rule and line and then poured them into molds, row upon row.

Yet even underneath those stark bones he perceived faint traces of a structure yet more ancient still; great blocks of grey granite cemented into the foundations of the city's walls and, here and there, twisting flights of stone steps worn thin as wafers by the feet of generations all hurrying on to death long, long ago. Once, wandering near the Minster, he had seemed to sense their hungry ghosts clustering all about him, imploring him with their shadowy char-

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nel mouths and their sightless eyes to tell them that they had not lived in vain. He had fled up onto the city walls and, gazing out across the Sea of Goole, had tried to imagine what it must have been like to live in the days before The Drowning. He strove to visualize the skies above the city filled with Morfedd's "metal birds" and the great sea road to Doncaster thronged with glittering carts drawn by invisible horses. But in truth it was like believing that the world traveled round the sun — something you accepted because you were told it was so — and a good deal less real than many of Old Peter's tales. Even the importunate ghosts of the dead were more alive in his imagination as they came flocking greyly in upon him, uncountable as the waves on the distant winter sea.

Staring into the setting sun, lost in time, he heard, deep within himself, yet another fragment of the melody he was always listening for. At once the smothering weight lifted from his heart. He turned, and skipping lightly down the steps, headed back to the inn.

Late on Christmas Eve a message was brought up to Clerk Seymour at the Chapter House that a man was below asking to speak with him on a matter of urgency.

The Clerk, a grey cobwebby man with a deeply lined face and bad teeth, frowned tetchily. "At this hour?" he protested. "What does he want?"

"He didn't say, except that it was for your own ear."

"Oh, very well. Send him up."

A minute later there were steps on the wooden stairs, a deferential knock at the door, and Old Peter appeared on the threshold with his hat in his hand. "Clerk Seymour?"

"Aye, sir. And who are you?"

Old Peter closed the door carefully behind him and came forward with hand outstretched. "Old Peter of Hereford," he said. "Tale-Spinner by calling. You and I are related by wedlock through my niece Margot."

"Aye, yes. To be sure. You are bringing her boy to me. Well met, cousin." They shook hands formally, and the Clerk gestured the old man to a seat. "I have heard many speak highly of your skill, Tale-Spinner," he said. "But am I not right in thinking you are over a week in York already?"

The old man made a self-deprecating gesture. "Truly I would have called sooner," he said, "but I guessed these weeks would be a busy time for all at the Chapter. Is it not so?"

The Clerk smiled faintly. "Aye, well, we are none of us idle at the Mass. That goes for you too, I daresay. You will take a cup of wine with me?"

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"That I will and gladly, cousin."

The Clerk fetched cups and a stone bottle from a cupboard. "And how goes the Fairing for you?" he enquired amiably.

"Faith I've never known one like it," said Peter. "I vow I could fill Cross Square four times over, and I had the voice to carry. They flock in like starlings."

The Clerk poured out the wine carefully, recorked the bottle, handed a cup to Peter and lifted his own in silent toast. Having taken a sip, he resumed his chair. "You are not working alone, I gather."

"Ah, the lad you mean?" Peter nodded indulgently. "Well, he pleaded with me to let him take a part, and I hadn't the heart to deny him. He has a mighty engaging way with him has Tom. But of course you'll know that."

"Not I," said the Clerk. "I've never set eyes on the boy. In truth, until Margot's letter I'd thought he was another girl. What is it he does with you?"

Peter licked a trace of wine from his lips. "I let him pipe a burden to my tales. A snatch or two here and there. It helps things along and it keeps him happy."

"He does it well?"

"I've had to coach him, of course. But he learns quickly. He has a good ear for a tune."

"Then it's clear that I must make time to come and hear you." The Clerk took another sip at his wine. "You see the Fairing out?"

"Aye. I had thought to leg to Doncaster for the New Year, but while things go so well ...."

Clerk Seymour nodded, wondering when the old man was going to get round to saying whatever it was that he had come to say. Surely it was not just to pass the time of day? "To Doncaster," he murmured. "Aye, well ...."

Old Peter set down his cup and plucked his lower lip thoughtfully. "Tell me, cousin Seymour," he said casually. "The Chapter School. Am I right in thinking they take lads of all ages?"

"Well, within reason, yes, that is so."

"Fourteen years would not be thought too old?"

"By no means. But surely I understood Margot to say ...."

"Yes, yes" said Peter quickly. "Young Tom won't span fourteen for a five-month yet. What I am anxious to know, cousin, is whether his place could be held open for him till then?"

"I'm not sure that I —"

"This would be in the nature of a personal favor to me, you understand, and naturally I should be prepared to recompense the Chapter for any inconvenience it might cause." The old man hesitated a mere half second,

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glanced sharply sideways and added, "Fifty royal?"

The Clerk did his best to conceal his astonishment and did not succeed. After all, the sum mentioned was as much as he earned in a six-month! He stared at Peter. "Forgive me, Tale-Spinner," he said. "But do I understand you right? You wish to postpone the boy's entry till he reaches his fourteenth year?"

Peter nodded.

The Clerk waved a hand. "Why this, I'm sure, could easily be arranged. But *why*?"

Old Peter sank back in his chair and let out his breath in a long sigh. "Cousin Seymour," he said, "you see before you an old man, friendless, alone in the world, with the final curtain about to come down upon his last act. For this month past I have found in Tom's constant companionship a source of solace and comfort I had not dreamed could be mine. My sole wish is to make one last farewell tour through the Seven Kingdoms and then back home to Cumberland and the long rest. Without Tom I could not face it. With him along it will be my crowning triumph. There now, *that* is the answer to your question."

The Clerk nodded, pursing his lips pensively. "And the boy? Presumably he is agreeable?"

"Oh, he loves the life! Fresh faces, fresh places. Why this last six weeks a whole new window has opened in Tom's world!"

"Then there would seem to be no problem."

"On the face of it, you are right, cousin. But the truth of the matter is it's not quite so simple. For one thing, there's still the lad's mother."

"You mean you haven't discussed it with her?"

"Well, until the lad expressed his desire to join up with me, the question didn't arise. Since then we've got along like a house a-fire. But it's only natural he should feel a good son's duty to abide by his mother's wish."

A gleam of belated understanding kindled in the Clerk's eye. "Ah, I *see*," he murmured. "So it would suit you if we could make this delay 'official'?"

Peter slipped his hand beneath his cloak, fumbled for a moment, then drew out a soft leather bag which clinked faintly as he laid it on the table. "What harm could there be in gratifying an old man's whim, cousin? I will cherish that boy as if he were my own son. I'll even undertake to school him in his letters. And I shall return him here to you, safe and sound, before the Midsummer High Mass. All I'm asking of you is that you write a letter to Margot explaining that the place you had bespoken for the lad

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will not be open to him till the summer, and that when I bring Tom along here you say the same to him. That done, we can all go our ways contented."

The Clerk reached out, uncorked the wine bottle, and poured out a second careful measure into the two cups. "There is but one thing troubles me," he said. "I have only your word for it that the boy is happy with you. I would have to speak to him alone before I could agree."

"You would not tell him that I have spoken with you, Cousin Seymour?"

"Naturally not," said the Clerk, lifting his cup and touching it against Peter's. "That is clearly understood. Nevertheless, for his mother's sake, I feel bound to insist upon it as a condition of our confidential 'arangement'."

"Agreed then," said Peter, and with his free hand he gathered up the bag of coins and shook it gently. "The moment you have satisfied yourself that matters are as I say, these will be yours to distribute as you think fit. To your health, cousin."

At the very moment when the Clerk to the Chapter was chatting so amiably with the old Tale-Spinner, a very different sort of discussion was taking place in a tall grey tower block at the far end of the Minster Close. This building, which was known locally as "The Falconry," was the headquarters of the whole Secular Arm of the Church Militant throughout the Seven Kingdoms. Its reputation was just as bleak as its appearance. Cold, functional, efficient; the only sign of decoration on the walls of The Falconry was an inscription in burnished steel characters riveted fast to the stonework above the main door: *Hic et Ubique.* This, when translated from its archaic tongue, read simply: "Here and Everywhere." Nothing further was needed.

The man responsible for overseeing all the multifarious activities of the Secular Arm had the official title of "Chief Falconer," though he was more generally spoken of as "the Black Bishop." Born in 2951, the illegitimate son of a Cornish tax-collector, he had been brought up by the Black Fathers and had risen to his high eminence by dint of great intellectual ability, an outstanding capacity for organization, and an appetite for sheer hard work which had already become something of a legend before he had reached the age of twenty-five. In the seven years since he had been appointed to his present office, he had completely revitalized the moribund structure he had inherited, and rumor had it that his

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heart was set on doing the same throughout the whole of Europe. Others maintained, sotto voce, that here rumor lied, since it was a proven fact that the Black Bishop had no heart at all.

What he did have was a fanatical sense of dedication and a will that brooked no obstacle. It was not ambition in the commonly accepted sense of that word, rather a kind of steely conviction that he and he alone was privy to the Truth. Long ago he had been vouchsafed a vision that would have struck a responsive chord in the imagination of many a nineteenth-century engineer, for he had dreamed of the Church Militant as a vast and complex machine in which every moving part functioned to perfection, and all to the greater glory of God. In such a machine, with fallible men as its components, fear was the essential lubricant, and none knew better than the Black Bishop when and where to apply the oil can. Yet he derived no particular pleasure from watching men tremble — indeed it was debatable whether he derived particular pleasure from anything — but if he deemed it necessary, he did it, and he deemed it necessary quite often.

Besides the Bishop there were four other men present in the Council Chamber high up on the fifth floor of The Falconry. They were seated two to each side of a long table. The Bishop himself sat at the head. For the past half an hour he had listened in silence while his four District Marshals gave him their verbal reports, and now, with the last one concluded, he simply sat there, his left elbow resting on the arm of his chair, his chin resting on the knuckles of his left hand, and slowly looked at each of them in turn. And one by one they quailed before his eyes, their own glances seeking the shelter of the tabletop or the candlelit corners of the room.

"So," he said quietly, "I ask for facts and you bring me rumors; I ask for the firebrand and all you can offer me is a cloud of smoke. Meanwhile every road into York is choked with credulous fools hurrying to witness the miraculous advent of ... of *what*? A goose? A swan? A seagull? What *is* it they're expecting? Surely one of you has discovered!"

The four officers continued to stare down at the tabletop. Not one of them cared to risk opening his mouth.

The Bishop thrust back his chair, stood up and walked over to the wall where a map of The Seven Kingdoms was hanging. He stood for a moment, with his hands clasped behind his back, contemplating it in silence. Finally he said, "And why here? Why York? Why

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not Carlisle? Edinboro? Newcastle? Belfast, even? There must *be* a reason."

One of the Marshals, Barran by name, observed tentatively: "In the legend, my Lord, the White Bird —"

"Yes, yes, I know all that, Barran. Lions and unicorns. Fairy-tale nonsense. But I sense a guiding hand behind it. I feel it here, in my bones." He turned away from the map and moved back restlessly towards his chair. "Why do men and women *need* miracles?" he asked. "Can any of you tell me that?"

They shook their heads.

"It is really very simple. If the life they know already is all there is for them to believe in, then most of them would be better off dead."

The Marshals' eyes widened as each one wondered whether the perilous boundary which demarcated heresy and orthodoxy was about to be redrawn.

"It has always been so," continued the Bishop somberly. "And what happens ultimately is that they are driven to create their own. Miracles born out of sheer necessity — out of spiritual starvation! Our danger is that unless we are careful they may do it here. The time is ripe, and there are sufficient gathered for the purpose."

"We could disperse them, my Lord."

"You think so, Thomas? That would be a miracle indeed! By tomorrow night, at the rate things are going, they will outnumber us by hundreds to our one."

"So many, my Lord?"

"I have it on the Mayor's authority. And there's another thing. So far there's been no whisper of civil trouble in the city. They're meek as sheep, all of them. Most have even brought in their own provisions for the week. All they do is wander up and down gawping at the Minster. Quiet as mice. Waiting. Just waiting. *But for what?*"

The Marshal called Barran cleared his throat and murmured: "I have heard it referred to as 'the forthcoming', my Lord."

"Go on."

"It is said that at the start of each millennium mankind is given another chance. They would have it that the Drowning in 2000 wiped the slate clean so that a new message could be written on it in the year 3000." He tailed off apologetically and turned his hands palm upwards on the table as if to disclaim any responsibility for what he had said.

The Bishop snorted. "The Drowning was the direct result of humanity's corporate failure to see beyond the end of its own nose. By 1985 it was already quite obvious that the global climate had been

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modified to the point where the polar ice caps were affected. Besides, the process itself lasted until well into the twenty-first century. Such dates are purely arbitrary."

"But, my lord," Barran protested, "the teachings of Jos—"

"Yes, yes," cut in the Bishop irritably, "because it suited the Church's purposes to denounce it as a Divine Judgment upon the Materialists — which of course it was. But that does not mean that the Church was not fully aware of the *physical* causes which underlay it. At the end of the twentieth century disaster could have struck in any one of a dozen different ways. By allowing us just time enough in which to adjust to it, the Drowning proved to be the most fortunate thing that could have happened. So five billions perished. When you consider the alternatives, you can only allow that God was exceedingly merciful."

The Marshals, back once more on firm ground, nodded in agreement.

"So," said the Bishop, "let us discard speculation and concentrate upon the practical aspects of our present situation. The one thing to be avoided at all costs is any sort of direct confrontation. The symbolic features of this ridiculous legend must on no account be permitted to gain a hold over their imaginations. Five days from now, *Deo volente*, they will all have dispersed to their homes, hopefully a good deal wiser than when they left them. In the meantime I wish our men to be seen, but nothing more. They must keep themselves in the background. Let them lend their assistance to the Civil Watch. But tell them to keep their eyes and ears open. At the first sign of anything out of the ordinary — anything which might conceivably be exaggerated into some spurious 'mircale' — get word back to me *at once*, and leave it to me to decide what action should be taken. Is that understood?"

The Marshals nodded, relieved that it had been no worse.

"Have you any further questions, gentlemen?"

There were none.

Two days after Christmas, Clerk Seymour sent a message to The Duke's Arms that he wished to speak with Tom. Old Peter accompanied the boy to the Chapter House. Of the two visitors there was no question who was the more nervous. Hardly had the introductions been made than Peter, pleading the afflictions of advanced age, scuttled off to relieve his bladder. It took him rather longer than might have been expected. When he reappeared, it was to learn, to his well-simulated

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dismay, that Tom would not be joining the Chapter School until the summer.

He clucked his tongue and shook his head dolefully, then brightened up. "No matter, lad!" he cried. "It's not the end of the world, is it? And the days twixt now and then will pass in an eyeblink, eh, Cousin Seymour?"

The Clerk nodded. "I have been suggesting to Thomas that he might do a greal deal worse than to keep you company on your spring travels, Tale-Spinner. Would such an arrangement be acceptable to you?"

"Nothing could please me better!" exclaimed the old man. "Why, Tom, we'll make that round tour of the Seven Kingdoms I spoke of. That'll give you something to brag about to your school fellows, eh? What do you say, lad?"

Tom smiled. "It's very kind of you, Peter."

"Pooh! Stuff!" cried the old man, clapping an arm round the boy's shoulders and hugging him tight. "We're a team, you and I. We stand together against the world, Tom. Artists both, eh? A few days more in York, then off down the high road to Doncaster. We'll follow the coast as far enough south as Nottingham, then, if the wind's fair, take a ship to Norwich. How does that like you?"

"It likes me well," said Tom.

"I shall be writing to your mother, Thomas," said the Clerk, "to let her know that you are in good hands. As soon as you have decided what your plans are, Tale-Spinner, I will be happy to include the information in my letter. We have a Church messenger leaving for Carlisle next Wednesday. I will see that he delivers it into her own hand."

"That's most civil of you, Cousin Seymour. Most civil."

"Myself, I depart for Malton directly," continued the Clerk, "but I shall be back on the eve of the New Year. Perhaps you would drop in on me then?"

"Indeed I shall. In the meantime I'll have roughed out some details of our trip."

The Clerk accompanied them to the door of the Chapter House, where they shook hands before making their way through the crowds which thronged the Minster Close. As they were passing The Falconry, a man emerged from beneath the overshadowing porch and caught sight of them. He paused a moment, watching them through narrowed eyes, then ran lightly down the steps and plucked the old man by his sleeve. "Greetings, old Tale-Spinner," he murmured. "Dost remember me?"

Peter turned. "Aye, sir," he said. "Even without the casque. How goes it, Falcon Gyre?"

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The man glanced back over his shoulder. "I was at the telling last night," he said.

"I am indeed honored," returned Peter, with the merest hint of irony in his voice. "Didst prefer it to the other?"

"I would talk with you, old man. But not here."

Peter flicked a quick glance at Tom, who appeared supremely unconcerned. "Aye, well," he muttered uneasily. "'Tis not the best of times, friend Gyre. We have a telling billed within the hour. Would not tomorrow be —"

"Tomorrow would be too late," said Gyre. "I know of a place hard by." As he spoke he tightened his grip perceptibly on the old man's arm and steered him, gently but firmly, towards a narrow alley.

By a series of twists and turns they were conducted into a courtyard which fronted on to a back-street market. There, in a dingy shop which was part alehouse, part general store, Gyre ordered up three mugs of spiced wine, guided the old man and the boy into a corner settle, and said, "You must quit York tonight."

For some seconds Peter was too taken aback to say anything at all; then he managed to stutter, "By whose authority comes this? We break no law."

Gyre shook his head. "I, Gyre, tell you this, old man. For three nights past I have had the same dreams. I wish no harm to befall you. Stay not in York." He spoke in little impetuous rushes, like one who has run hard and snatches for his breath.

Old Peter gazed at him, noted the unnatural brightness of eyes which he had first seen cold as the pennies in a dead man's sockets, and he remembered the way this licensed bird of prey had stood up in his stirrups and stared back along the sunlit road to Hammerton Bridge. "A dream, eh, friend?" he murmured mildly. "And three nights running. Is that all you can tell us?"

Gyre looked from the old man to the boy and back again. "I noose my own neck by speaking of it with you," he said. "Will you not be warned?"

"Aye, man, we are truly grateful. Think not otherwise. But this dream of yours. Could it not have some other reading?"

"Perhaps," said Gyre, and all the urgency had suddenly drained from his voice. He sounded almost indifferent.

"You cannot tell us?"

"It comes and it goes again," said Gyre, and frowned. "I know when it has been, but I know nothing of its nature."

"And yet you sought us out to warn us?"

"Aye, well." Gyre shrugged.

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"Something came over me." He got up and, without another word to them, walked out of the shop and disappeared, leaving his drink untasted on the table.

Old Peter stared after him, kneading his chin with his thumb knuckle. "What make you of that?" he asked.

"He meant it," said Tom.

"Yes. But meant *what*, lad? Did you see his eyes?"

Tom sipped his drink and said nothing.

"I'll warrant he'd been chewing 'Drasil root.'"

"But we could go, couldn't we, Peter? We don't have to stay now, do we?"

"Ah, you're forgetting your Cousin Seymour. He won't be back from Malton till Monday. Besides, lad, this place is a regular gold mine for us. Close on twenty royal a day we're taking. A *day*! And I can recall plenty of times when I've not taken one in a week!"

"All right," said Tom. "So we'll stay."

"Me, I'm not superstitious," said Peter. "I can't afford to be. Still I wouldn't like you to feel that I —"

Tom laughed. "And abandon a gold mine? Never!"

"Ah, I thought you'd see it my way," said Peter, and catching up Gyre's abandoned mug, he swigged it off in a single draught.

At the tenth hour of the New Year's Eve, Old Peter shrugged on his heavy cloak and set out to keep his appointment at the Chapter House. That afternoon he had totted up the sum of their takings over the past fornight and found it came to the staggering total of one hundred and seventy-eight royals. Even allowing for the fifty he had pledged to the Clerk, this was still a golden harvest the like of which he had never known. It had driven him, for the first time in his life, to seek the services of the bankers. Now, folded flat and stowed away in a concealed pocket within the lining of his doublet, he carried a letter of credit which would see them both round the Seven Kingdoms and back again to York even if they never took another quarter. Truly, as far as Peter was concerned, the advent of the millennium had already proved wholly miraculous.

As he approached the Chapter House, he was astonished to find the Minster Close almost deserted. On this night of all nights he had expected to see the crowds milling in readiness to celebrate the midnight chimes. Then he recalled how an Order had been promulgated from The Falconry that very morning banning all such gatherings withing the city walls on account of a case of plague which had been discovered. He looked

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about him. Over the roofs to the south he saw the low clouds already tinted a coppery red from the flames of invisible bonfires that had presumably been kindled on the open ground beyond the southern gate. He decided that as soon as his business with the Clerk was concluded he would take a stroll along the walls to watch the sport.

He was kept waiting for a cold half hour at the Chapter House before Clerk Seymour could receive him, and by the time all the details of the transaction had been settled, the cash handed over and a pledge drunk in wine, the last half-hour chime before midnight was sounding from the Minster. Peter stepped back out into the night to find that the air had become alive with snowflakes, large and soft as swansdown. There was no wind at all, and where the two wall torches flamed beside the entrance to The Falconry, the currents of rising air were setting the drifting flakes into a swirling dance like twin clouds of golden moths.

As the old man hefted up the hood of his cloak and retied the leather laces at his chin, a solitary horseman came spurring into the Close. He reined up outside the Falconry, flung himself from the saddle and, without even bothering to tether his mount, raced up the steps and into the building. Reflecting that no news travels faster than bad news, Peter made haste to quit the scene. He was hurrying towards the southern gate when a troop of five Falcons, helmeted and with their bows at their backs, galloped past him down the main street, the steel shod hooves of their horses striking showers of sparks from the snow-slippery cobblestones. So uncannily silent was the town that Peter could hear their clattering racket long after they had passed out of his sight.

The last quarter-chime had just died on the air as he set foot on one of the ancient stairways that led up to the top of the city wall. Pausing to gather breath for the climb, the old man suddenly remembered Tom. The thought came to him in the form of a brilliantly clear mental image of the boy's face as he had once seen it lit up by the flamelight from Norris' hearth. As if a hand had been thrust violently into his back, the old man began scrambling up the stairs two at a time. Heart pounding, lungs wheezing like a blacksmith's bellows, he staggered up on to the battlements and peered dizzily over. The sight that met his eyes all but brought his heart to a full stop. By the light of a dozen bonfires an enormous crowd was assembled, a silent sea of blank white faces gazing upwards towards the city wall. The only sound to be heard

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was the crackle of flames as a log broke in two and a fountain of sparks swept up to meet the ceaseless downward sift of the snowflakes. The *only* sound? "Dear God," groaned the old man in what was part prayer, part incantation, "Dear God, no."

He set off in a shambling, broken-winded run along the battlements, pausing every now and again to peer downwards. He came upon other silent watchers, first in ones and twos, then clustered ever more closely together, leaning over the parapet, rapt and still. He elbowed his way between two of them and saw that a little way below and some thirty paces to his right a rough wooden scaffold had been erected by masons working to repair an inward-curving section of the wall. A ladder led down from the parapet to a boarded platform, and there, seated so casually that one leg hung dangling over the airy gulf below, was Tom. His back resting against a rough pine joist, the snow already beginning to settle unheeded upon his bent head, he was playing his lament for The White Bird of Kinship; playing it really for nobody but himself, unless perhaps it was for the spirit of a man he had once loved who had dreamed an impossible dream of human brotherhood long ago among the hills and valleys of Bowness.

As Peter stared downwards, it seemed to him that the whole scene was becoming oddly insubstantial; the pale upturned faces of the silent crowd beginning to swirl and mingle with the drift and swirl of the pale flakes; the stones along the parapet touched with the rosy firelight until they appeared to glow with the warm inward glow of molten glass. All about him he seemed to sense a world becoming subtly transformed into something wholly new and strange, yet a part of him still realized that this transformation must lie within his own perception, within himself.

— I believe there's a master key, Peter. One to unlock the whole world. I call that key The White Bird.

As the boy's words came whispering back into his memory, an extraordinary excitement gripped the old man. Fear slipped from him like a dusty cloak. He began to hear each separate note of the pipe as clearly as if Tom were sitting playing at his side, and he knew that every listener in that vast concourse was hearing the same. So it was that, despite himself, no longer caring, Peter found his head had tilted backwards until the feathery snowflakes came drifting down upon his own upturned face. And gradually, as he surrendered himself to the song, he too began to hear what Gyre had once heard —

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the great surging downrush of huge wings whose enormous beat was the very pulse of his own heart, the pulse of life itself. He felt himself being lifted up to meet them as if he were being rushed onwards faster and faster along some immense and airy avenue of cool white light. Of their own accord his arms rose, reached out in supplication, pleading silently — *Take me with you ... take me ... take me ...* But, ah, how faint they were becoming, how faint and far away. Ghostly wingbeats sighing fainter and ever fainter, washed backwards by an ebbing sky-tide, drifting beyond his reach far out over the distant southern sea. Away. Gone away. Gone.

The old Tale-Spinner opened his eyes without realizing that he had ever closed them. What had happened? There was a mysterious sighing in the air, an exhalation, as if the held breath of the whole world had been released. *Gone away. Gone. Our bird. Our own White Bird. Why hast thou forsaken us?* He shook his head like a wet dog and blinked round at the vacant, dream-drugged faces beside him. And it was then that he realized the music had stopped. A sound most like an animal's inarticulate bewildered growl broke from his throat. He lunged forward, thrust himself half over the parapet and squinted down through the lazily drifting petals of the indifferent snow.

The boy was lying, head slumped, limbs twisted askew on the wooden platform. Through the left side of his chest a single crossbow bolt fledged with ravens' feathers was skewering him to the pine joist behind him. One hand was still clutched around the projecting shaft of the bolt as if to pull it free. On the snowy boards blood was already spreading outwards in a slow, dim puddle.

Forcing his way through the press of stunned spectators, the old man gained the ladder by which Tom must have descended and, heedless of his own safety, clambered down to the platform. As he set foot on it, the Minster bells suddenly unleashed their first great clamorous peal, flighting out the Old Year and welcoming in the New.

Accompanied by Marshal Barran, the Chief Falconer strode furiously along the top of the city wall. In the distance he could make out a little huddled knot of onlookers, lit by flickering torchlight, gathered around the top of the scaffolding. Down in the meadows below, the mounted troopers were already dispersing the crowd. For the third time he asked the same question: "And you are *certain* this was the same boy?"

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"There could not be two such, my Lord. He fits the Boroughbridge report perfectly."

"Insane," muttered the Bishop. "Absolutely insane. Whose troop is the madman in?"

"Dalkeith's, my Lord."

"And why *that* way when he could have slit the pup's throat in a back alley and no one a wit the wiser? Now we've got ourselves five thousand eyewitnesses to a needless martyrdom. And on this one night of all nights!"

"Aye, my Lord. They're already murmuring about the Black Bird."

"And for how long do you suppose it will stay a murmur? In a month they'll be shouting it from the rooftops. What they'll be saying by this time next year is anybody's guess."

Already the snow was falling more heavily, and a breeze had sprung up, blowing in from the sea, bringing the smoke from the dying bonfires billowing up along the battlements. Two members of the Civil Watch had found a plank, had laid the boy's body upon it. Having covered it with a piece of sacking, they were now arguing about how best to get it down the narrow steps. The Chief Falconer strode into the center of the group. "Back!" he commanded.

As they shuffled to obey, he stooped over the makeshift bier, twitched aside the sacking and stared down at the pale calm face of the dead boy. He caught sight of a leather lace about the throat and, thinking it might be a crucifix, jerked it clear. All he found was a bloody fragment of a shattered green pebble. "The bolt," he said. "Where is the bolt?"

"I have it safe," said a voice from the shadows.

The Bishop raised his cowled head and peered into the shadows. "Who are you?"

"Peter of Hereford. Tale-Spinner. He was my lad."

Marshal Barran leant across and whispered something into the Bishop's ear. The Chief Falconer frowned. "What know you of this sad accident, Peter?"

The old man stepped forward into the pool of quivering torchlight. From beneath his cloak he produced the black-fledged bolt, its crumpled feathers already stiff with congealed blood. "This was an accident, sire?" he said. "Your birds flew here this night to shed innocent blood."

"Have a care for your tongue, old man."

"Fear you the truth, my Lord Bishop? Know then there should by rights have been two of us down there. I to tell the tale and he to breathe the breath of life into it. Ask any who heard Tom play whether or not the White Bird of Kinship hovered here tonight."

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The Bishop glanced swiftly round at the circle of impassive faces and felt suddenly as if the sea wind was blowing right through his bones. Why was this old scoundrel not afraid to speak these heresies to his face? Men had been racked to death for less. Something was stirring here that even he might well be powerless to quell. There was a rank smell of false faith in the air. Well, at least there would be no more public martyrdoms this night. He touched the bier with his foot. "Get this down to the gatehouse. As for you, Tale-Spinner, present yourself at The Falconry by the tenth hour of forenoon. Meanwhile you would be well advised to place a closer guard over that precious tongue of yours."

The snow stopped shortly after dawn. When Peter made his way to The Falconry next morning, it was through streets muffled as if on purpose to honor the dead. Everywhere along his route, people, recognized him, came up and touched hands and went away. Few said more than "I was there," but their eyes were eloquent.

The ghost of an old fear brushed against him as he mounted the snowy steps to The Falconry, but it no longer had the same power to freeze him from the inside out. He strode into the building, stamped the ice from his boots and told the doorkeeper who he was. The man directed him down an echoing passage into a room where a log fire was burning. Crouched on a stool beside the fire was Falcon Gyre.

Peter gazed at the bowman in surprise, then walked across and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Well met, friend," he murmured. "Would that we had heeded those dreams of yours."

Gyre looked up but there was no hint of recognition in his eyes. They seemed to look right through the old man to something far beyond that only he could see. Peter remembered how he had stared back along the sunlit road across the moors to Hammerton and wondered what thoughts were going through his mind. "You did your best, friend," he said. "No one could have done more."

As though by a superhuman effort Gyre brought his eyes to focus on the face above him. His lips trembled loosely, and, suddenly, with a shock of real pity, Peter saw the man was weeping silently, the tears runneling down his unshaven cheeks and dripping unheeded from his chin. At that moment the door opened and the Chief Falconer walked in. He stood for a moment gazing with obvious distaste at the blubbering Gyre; then he turned to Peter. "What do you wish done with him?"

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Peter glanced round, half convinced that the Bishop was addressing someone else in the room whom he had not yet seen. "I?" he protested. "Why should I ...?"

"He has not told you?"

"He has not spoken a word. I thought perhaps he was —"

"He is in a state of profound shock," said the Bishop. "He remembers nothing. Nevertheless he was responsible for the accidental death of the boy."

"*Gyre!* Never!"

"So you know his name?"

"Aye. We rode into York together. My lord, I assure you there has been some mistake. This cannot be the man."

"There has been no mistake," said the Bishop testily. "Gyre loosed the bolt by accident. Think you we would have *ordered* him to do it? Surely even you must have the wit to realize that it was the last thing on earth we could have wished."

Peter stared down at the silently weeping man and then back to the Bishop. "No man could have fired that shot by accident," he said slowly. "It would have been difficult even for a skilled marksman. Upwards — against the snow — with only the firelight to aim by? That was no accident. But whoever did it, it was not Gyre."

The Bishop drew his lips back against his teeth with a faint sucking sound. "And just what makes you so certain?" he asked curiously.

Peter shrugged. What had either of them to lose by it now? "Because Gyre tried to warn us to leave the city three days ago."

"*Warn* you? How?"

"He told us to quit York. He said he had a dream."

The Bishop gazed at the old man, seeing the ripples of superstition multiplying, crowding thick upon each other, ringing outward wider and wider with every minute that passed. "A dream," he said flatly. "What dream?"

"He would not tell us. But he said he had the same dream three nights running. He just warned us to leave. Would to God we'd listened to him. But I had arrangements still to make with the Chapter Clerk for the lad's schooling."

"Schooling?" echoed the Bishop. "Are you telling me the boy was to enter the Chapter School?"

"Aye, my Lord. That's why I brought him here to York."

"But in that case he was certainly destined for the Ministry."

"I know naught of that, my Lord."

The Bishop punched one hand into the other. "Oh, he was, he

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was," he said. "There can be no question of it. Besides, the Clerk will certainly confirm it. You must realize that this puts a very different complexion on the matter."

"How so, my Lord?"

"Why naturally he must be interred in the Minster crypt with all due honor as befits a true son of the Church. How like you that, old man? Better than a public grave in the wall ditch, wouldn't you say?"

Peter looked hard at him. "I daresay Tom will not be minding much either way," he said. "But make it a grave in the open Close if you must. Those Minster stones would lie too heavy on his heart."

"So be it," said the Bishop. "Leave it to us, old man. I promise you he shall lack for nothing."

"Except a little breath, my Lord."

Frost laid an icy finger on the Bishop's smile. "Have a care," he murmured, "or that golden tongue of yours may buy you a grave of your own."

And so it came to pass that on the third day of the New Year the Minster bells rang out once more. The pine coffin decked with blood-berried holly, was borne from the gatehouse through the twisting streets to the doors of the Minster and vanished inside. By the time it re-emerged, the crowd of mourners in the Close had swollen beyond computation, lapping out even to engulf the steps of the Falconry itself.

Gazing down somberly from his fifth-floor eyrie, the Chief Falconer was moved to question his own wisdom in acceding to the old man's wish that the body be buried outside the Minster. Where had they all appeared from, these massed ranks of silent watchers? What marvelous sign were the fools hoping for? He watched with growing impatience as the bearers made their slow way through the crowd towards the heap of upturned earth beside the newly dug grave. As they laid the coffin across the leather straps, the first feathery flake of a new snowfall came drifting downwards outside the window. Another followed and another, and then the Bishop saw faces here and there in the throng lift and gaze upwards. In less than a minute only the officiating clergy appeared concerned in the burial, the rest were reaching upwards, hands outstretched in supplication towards this miraculous mana, softly falling feathers of the immortal White Bird of Kinship whose song once heard would never be forgotten.

The Bishop turned to Marshal Barran with a mirthless smile. "I suppose you realize that it is more than likely we are witnessing a

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future miracle."

Barran nodded. "You did well, my Lord, to claim him for the Church. Think what this might have become had it taken place below the city walls."

"I hope you're right," said the Chief Falconer. "Myself, I'm not so sure. What if this fledgling we've taken into our nest should prove to be a cuckoo?"

Barran returned his attention to the scene below just in time to see the coffin disappear jerkily out of sight. The priest scattered a handful of soil into the grave and stepped back. As he did so those nearest to the graveside shuffled forward, and each appeared to drop something white onto the lid of the hidden coffin. Soon, a long procession had formed. As it wound slowly past the heap of raw earth, each man, woman and child stretched out an arm and dropped a single white feather into the open grave.

Barran debated whether to draw the Bishop's attention to this new development and decided against it. Instead, he remarked, "Do you recall, my Lord, how the fable ends?"

"With the death of the bird, of course."

"Oh, no, my Lord. They would have it that when the blood of the dying white bird splashes the breast of the black, then the black bird becomes white itself and the cycle is repeated."

The Bishop swung round on his Marshal, his eyes seeming to smolder like dark red coals. "In God's name, Barran, don't you see what you're saying? Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"My Lord," stammered the Marshal, "indeed I would have done so, but you assured me you were familiar with the legend. As I recall it you —"

"Aye, man, I remember. Lions and unicorns I called it. Stupid fairytale nonsense. Well, so it is. So are they all. Credulous idiots. Children. Fools." He sighed. "Ah, well, it's done now — for better or worse. I only wish I could believe it was for the better."

Standing beside the grave, with the snow falling all about him, a lone piper had begun to play a hauntingly familiar lament.

"Amen to that, my Lord," murmured the Marshal.

Three days after the funeral two men rode out of the city by the south gate and took the shore road for Doncaster. One rider was Old Peter of Hereford; the other an ex-Falcon by the name of Gyre. Around Gyre's neck was fastened a thick hinged band of studded brass clamped at the throat by a steel padlock. The key to this lock was in Old Peter's purse. The Collar of

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Servitude was the punishment which, as near kin, he had elected at the behest of the Secular Court; the rejected alternative would have been ritual blinding with a white-hot iron.

When they were some fifteen kilometers clear of the city, Old Peter signaled Gyre to dismount, then climbed down off his own horse. He beckoned the Falcon to him, unlocked the brass collar and flung it far out into the Sea of Goole. The key followed it. "That's the way Tom would have wanted it," said the old man, panting from his exertions. "You're free Gyre."

Gyre, who had spoken no intelligible word to anyone since loosing the fatal bolt, turned away, went back to his horse and unfastened one of the leather saddlebags. From inside it he took out something wrapped in a piece of blue cloth which he brought to Peter.

"What's this?" said the old man. "An exchange, eh?" He unwrapped the cloth and then drew in his breath in a painful hiss. "Man, how came you by this?"

Gyre looked down at the pipes which the Wizard of Bowness had fashioned for Tom, and then he laid his clasped hands against his chest and crouched down in the damp sand at the water's edge and whimpered like a dog.

"Why did you do it, Gyre?" muttered the old man. "What made you."

Gyre raised his head, unclasped his hands, and with his right forefinger gently touched the barrel of the pipe. As he did so the sun thrust aside the clouds and shone down upon him. An expression of childlike wonder softened his ravaged face. His fingers closed round the pipe, eased it from the old man's grasp, and then set it to his own lips. Closing his eyes, he blew gently down it and then began to move his fingers over the stops.

To his dumb amazement the old man heard the unmistakable air of one of the themes which Tom had first devised for *Amulet* and then incorporated into his Lament for the White Bird. Gyre played it all through once, and then again.

As Peter listened in a sort of trance, understanding broke over him in a foaming wave of revelation. It was as though the music had brought him the answer to his own question. And it lay back there behind him on a road fifteen kilometers to the northward where the boy had once said to him in that quiet, supremely confident way of his — "I told *him* about the White Bird. He wanted to believe me, so it was easy." But what was it you had wanted to believe, Gyre? That the Bird was a living reality which would indeed come winging down out of the winter sky? If you

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believed that, then you would have to believe all the rest too. Which meant believing that the Bird *must* die in order to live again!

Like bright bubbles rising to the swirling surface, memories began to cluster together in the old man's mind; remembered things that Tom had said: "They are such ninnies they'll believe anything" — "I thought of him like I think of the dogs, not as a man at all" — "I take their thoughts and give them back my own." And others too. "Our thoughts are unseen hands shaping the people we meet" — "Morfedd planned it all years ago. Long before he chose me. Before I was even born." The old man began to shiver right deep down in the very marrow of his bones. What manner of being had this boy been? What latent power in him had Morfedd recognized and nurtured? Was it possible Tom could have *known* what he was about — or even *half* known — enough to stamp a picture of his own destiny on Gyre's too willing mind? *Could he have chosen his own death?* Every instinctive fiber in Peter's being rejected the notion. And yet ... and yet ... the pattern would not go away. One by one the nails thudded into the coffin, and among the hands wielding the hammers one was his own. "I thought you'd see it my way." *Thud!* "You're forgetting your Cousin Seymour. He won't be back from Malton till Monday." *Thud!* "What harm could there be in gratifying an old man's whim, cousin?" *Thud!* Nailed down by the strength of an old man's weakness. That collar should have been round his own neck, not Gyre's. With everything to lose, poor crazed Gyre had at least seen the boy as an end in himself. "I, Gyre, tell you this. I know when it has been, but I know nothing of its nature." Why was it that men could never value things truly till they were gone?

Far out to sea a ship with silver-white sails was dipping and plunging in and out of the slanting shafts of sunlight. Eagerly the blue-grey waves hurried in, stumbled, and creamed up the gently shelving beach as they had done for a thousand years. The old Tale-Spinner looked down at the man still crouched at his feet. A huge calmness descended upon him. He stretched out his arm and gripped Gyre gently by the shoulder. Then he walked down to the water's edge and dipped both his hands into the sea. Returning, he tilted back Gyre's head and with a wet finger drew across his forehead the sign that Tom had once drawn on a misty window of an inn — a child's representation of a flying bird. "Come, friend," he said. "You and I together have a tale to tell. Let us be on our way."

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Despite the title, we doubt it. Still, this story would be hard to beat for some decidedly fresh and basic switches on the theme. J. O. Jeppson is a psychiatrist and the author of a novel, The Second Experiment.

Positively The Last Pact With — The Devil?

by J. O. JEPPSON

Hearken, oh Earthmen, to my sad story of disaster and outrage. Consider my woes, including the necessity of translating this into your miserably difficult language. Yes, weep for me, but don't let those damn human tears land on my hide — they chap.

I was once a happy being, content in my position as Computer Attendant on our planet, Uxslup the Beautiful, and determined to win the degree for which I had been working many years. The Computer is in the Building of Applied Science, a large and complex edifice in which the filing system gets overloaded, so that I am not entirely responsible for what happened.

It was certainly not my fault that although I had been studying Earth records for my doctorate, it was entirely by mistake that my name was included on the list of Uxsluppian Collectors and — horror of horrors — assigned to Earth. Furthermore, the relevant documents informing me of this new position went astray in the mails. I was not prepared.

Earth history was known to me, not only because of my thesis — "Necessary Permutations of Medieval Social Norms Reflected in the Psychopathology of Fears of Adders and Serpents and Infernal Gate Inscriptions" — but also because your pushy little planet is a prime example of misguided intelligence in the dominant life form. There was, in addition, the mysterious disappearance of the previous Collector. However, I confess that we Uxsluppians, although so much more intelligent and sensible than Earthmen, tended to forget to notice what was going on in that obscure section of a remote spiral arm of an otherwise admirable galaxy.

I was just immersing myself in a

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deliciously hot bath when the unexpected summons came and I arrived in the living room of that infamous monster, Carson Boskov.

"You're dripping on my carpet," said Carson.

"But I ...."

"And I thought you'd be bigger."

I drew myself up to my full height, four feet in Earth measurements, and wished I had a towel. I surveyed the pentagram at my feet in distaste.

"I am an exceptionally tall Uxsluppian," I said as politely as possible from my central speaking aperture. My left horn twitched nervously, my hide puckered in the oxygen-rich air, and the fork in my tail itched.

Carson towered over me. "I can hardly understand you," he said in that typically heavy, oily Earthman voice. "Must you squeak?"

"Please be so kind as to inform me of how this happened," I said — plaintively, I admit.

"And you're bright red! Do you sweat sulfuric acid, because it seems to be eating my carpet ...."

"I was in the bath," I said with dignity. "What do you want?"

"The usual," said Carson. "But first let me explain myself. I am a neurophysiologist, cyberneticist, extraordinary genius, winner of the Nobel prize for my work on computer analogues of the nervous system, and I've thought about devils for a long time. It occurred to me that perhaps the pentagram symbol was keyed into a telepathic computer somewhere in the galaxy that would respond to appropriate emotion-laden words. I have searched through libraries of the occult until I found what I thought were several verbal rituals in several languages. I tried them all, but being an unusually clear-headed, controlled, unimpassioned genius, I did not succeed in working up the required emotional fervency until tonight."

"And how did you manage tonight?" I asked, thinking mournfully of the charming female waiting for me at the Grand Kaludhat's party, which was why I'd been taking a bath.

"After I beat the one in the lab at chess today, I worked up an impassioned desire to have the best computer in the universe," said Carson, sitting down opposite the pentagram.

"Well, you can't have it since it belongs to Uxslup. Why not ask for your heart's desire?"

"That happens to be my heart's desire."

I scratched my tail. "I've always understood that humans had ordinary wishes — riches, power, long life, successful evasion of income tax — surely you could be satisfied with any of those?

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Intelligent beings on other planets are."

"Other planets?" Carson settled back in his comfortable chair, crossing his repulsively lanky legs while I continued to drip on the carpet.

"Since you have figured out that devils, as humans have always called us Uxsluppians, are not supernatural, you will readily understand that we need to keep our Central Computer growing. As top creature in the galaxy, we have always Collected suitable intelligent specimens from every parsec of space, even from this extremely unpleasant planet."

"Indeed," said Carson, "you've been around a lot lately. Things are a mess on Earth."

"Don't blame your troubles on us. No one has teleported to Earth for centuries, except for my unfortunate predecessor."

"What happened to him?"

"He had a terrible case of arthritis in his terminal tail joint — that's where we do a considerable amount of our logical thinking — and thought he would benefit from a vacation in a primitive environment. He actually asked to become Collector for Earth, but we've never heard from him."

Carson yawned, as I believe the expression is for that peculiar display of widening the speaking aperture to show the built-in chopping weapons. "What's your name?"

"Mef 27."

"Listen, Mef, how did Uxsluppians find Earth in the first place?"

"A typical story. Prehistoric members of the planet's most intelligent species start using tools, get to drawing pictures, using strong emotional expletives when the tools don't work or the pictures won't come out right, and before you know it they've invented oaths and the pentagram. So at times they're bound to tie into the telepathic network of our Computer. Fortunately, only Uxsluppians in high governmental positions — or scientific research, it being the same thing in our enlightened world — know the secret of using computers to focus psi powers and provide instantaneous teleportation anywhere. That way, we can control any rebellion within our Empire immediately."

"Then Earth is part of the Uxsluppian Empire?"

I shivered, possibly from the cold, but probably from premonition. "Certainly not. You are not civilized enough. Earth was used, before it got too dirty and crowded, primarily for tourist entertainment — fertility rites, black magic, witch hunts, and other fun and games."

A faint but ominously contemptuous smile flickered over Carson's bony face — give me

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handsome Uxsluppian blob any time — as he said, "But what about your habit of collecting souls?"

"Oh, that. Actually, we Collect brains, or rather the central intelligence agency of whatever nervous system we want to — why are you laughing?"

"Central intell —" Carson rose, chuckling, and strode over to a container of liquid to pour himself an evil-smelling drink. "Then what do you do with the Collected brains, my red friend?"

"We hook them into our Computer, of course. While Uxsluppians are able to teleport onto any pentagram field to which the Computer focuses — even against their will, as you have witnessed — we are not telepathic and thus of no use in our Computer system."

Carson nodded thoughtfully and then sniffed suspiciously at me. "Chlorine? I thought it was supposed to be sulfur?"

I whitened in embarrassment. "Sulfur from the bath. Chlorine from, er, sweat — we do that when the atmosphere is too cold."

"Nervous, eh?" said Carson, maliciously penetrating my rationalization. He extracted a large piece of folded material from his pocket and threw it at me.

Gratefully — oh, the irony of it — I dried and draped myself, struggling to continue my narration. I had never read of such a wordy encounter with a human before. I'd always thought they simply made a deal, or got on their knees to pray.

"You see," I said, "while humans were in their medieval period, we switched our economy from one based on separate electromechanical computers of the antique type you now use to a unified micromolecular arrangement run on an electrochemical-neurophysiological basis. We Collected central intell — that is, brains, from all over the galaxy. On primitive planets like Earth, it was easier to do this by means of the pact-with-the-Devil routine. Signing a contract creates a psychological set in the brain that facilitates subsequent Collection and removal to the tank."

"Tank?"

"Yes, our beautiful tank of brains, all immortal, thanks to the artificial protoplasm we invented to protect and nourish the specimens. We haven't needed many new specimens for years — well, I mean — the economy hasn't permitted much scientific expansion."

"I know how that is," said Carson, reaching down to tap my right horn with a ball-point pen. I found out later that he always corrected manuscripts, wrote mathematical calculations, and did crossword puzzles with a pen.

"I suppose I ought to wish for

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a rich lode of uranium to be planted under my back yard," he said, meditatively stroking his ugly, protruding chin, "or perhaps a brief teleportation to the innards of Fort Knox, with enough longevity shots to have time and money to build my own computer ...."

"Excellent," I said with relief, thinking I might be able to make it to the Grand Kaludhat's orgy after all. "You've shown that humans are capable of constructive thinking."

"But I've changed my mind," said Carson. "I will sell my brain to you for immediate placement in your Central Computer."

"My dear human! That's the punishment part of the pact, as I understand it. You shouldn't go against tradition. After all, the tank is called hell, just to please the human specimens."

"Take me to hell, Mef, immediately."

I sighed. "Very well. I didn't bring the official form with me, but I'll write it out on this paper from your desk." I reached for it, noting that at the top of the paper Carson's name was imprinted egocentrically — that ego I expected to have within our power soon.

"Here, Carson Boskov, Ph.D. Sign this."

"In blood?"

"Great Uc, no! It corrodes my fingers. I don't know how that legend got started. Use some other body fluid if you must. I believe your kidneys ...."

"Certainly not."

"Spit?" I asked, conscious that the sweating of my hide was all too likely to produce a temporary ion deficiency and therefore a whopper of an Uxsluppian headache.

"Excuse the expression, Mef, but for hell's sake what do most of your victims use?"

"Ink."

Just short of an Uxsluppian year later, I was hard at work on my thesis, which had been turned down by my committee for the sixth time, when someone entered my room in the Building of Applied Science without knocking.

"It's been a most interesting and profitable experience," said Carson Boskov. "Thanks for Collecting me."

"You can't be here!" As I lept up in astonishment, my hooves tangled with my tail, and I discovered the floor to be exceedingly hard on my proximal tail joints. "You're only a brain in the tank," I shouted. "You have no body!"

This was unlikely, since there he was, flexing the muscles of his totally, repulsively nude body.

"Amazing what a properly run giant Computer can do with

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undifferentiated protoplasm when it puts its mind to it," he said.

I looked frantically around for the emergency alarm, never before used. I wished again that Uxsluppians were telepathic, and I was so unstrung I couldn't garner my psi forces for teleportation, always difficult without a pentagram.

"Don't work at trying to kill me," said Carson, "since there are several exact copies. I've made improvements in the original, equipping some bodies with special adaptive mechanisms for planets not ordinarily habitable by human beings, and all of us are telepathic, linking up with other potential telepaths throughout the galaxy. You Uxsluppians are out as top creature."

"I'll teleport for help!"

"We'll follow. We can do it too, without pentagrams. We've gone to all the key planets of your Empire. We're running the galaxy now."

"But my dear Carson ...."

"The name is Dr. Boskov, Mef. If you're a good boy, maybe you'll get that doctorate."

"I will not be led astray from the paths of virtue!"

"I said, do you want that degree, Mef?"

I was tempted, sorely tempted. "What must I do?"

"Just sign this contract for a place in my new business — Boskov's Bodies for Better Being."

"What's the catch?"

"If you'll read the fine print, you'll see that your new job as Computer Attendant is to make sure the tenants of the tank don't fudge up their linkages."

"But I already do that!"

"These will be new tenants, since the previous tank inhabitants have left. We'll use Uxsluppian brains — from high governmental positions, of course — and augment your species' teleporting

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power to do the heavy work of the galaxy — moving planets, even suns."

"You'll destroy galactic ecology!"

Carson grinned, a tail-chilling sight. "We may even rearrange the universe. Since we now live forever and the universe may ultimately rearrange itself to our disadvantage, we're going to control it. Uxsluppians will be performing a noble duty in the tank."

"Confined to hell!"

"Forever," said Carson remorselessly. "Sign here."

I succumbed to evil temptation. I signed. I had a terrible headache.

"By the way," said Carson, folding the pact, "I found out what happened to the Uxsluppian Collector who disappeared on Earth. It seems he teleported onto what he thought was a large, convenient homing diagram. It turned out to be the wet foundations of a huge five-sided structure we were building near Washington, D. C., U.S.A. Since you Uxsluppians can't move heavy weights unless several of you work together, and since he became part of the cement, he was trapped."

"And he's still there?"

"No, it seems he finally tunneled out, only to emerge in another building ...."

"Not — not the white one ...."

"You Uxsluppians have a lot to answer for. Get a move on, Mef."

I don't mean to complain, Earthmen, but please have pity. It's been two centuries now — and you untrustworthy sons of hell have not honored that last pact. I still don't have my Ph.D.!

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"What do you mean by 'bad writing'" people ask. "Language is only a tool. Why do you make value judgements of the carpenter's grip when what matters is that the nails be driven in?"

All right. Here are the opening lines — not the worst lines, nor the best — of Michael Davidson's *The Karma Machine* (Popular Library, $1.25):

Yeshua stirred.

"Glide in, my son, glide in," Amitabha whispered as he hovered over Yeshua's air bed. With a wave of his hand, he dismissed the half-dozen white-robed technicians who had been assisting him. He wanted this first moment with Yeshua, alone.

"Aware yourself, Yeshua, but gently, gently."*

Now, why do I say that? Here is a perfectly understandable situation, after all. Yeshua is semicomatose and airborne outside, and Amitabha is attempting to assist him, floating nearby. There is some confusion about the technicians, but presumably they've helped wane Yeshua's unawareness. In this world of the future, too, the adjective is displacing the verb, and there has been a quaint preservation of the late 20th century's curious over-use of adverbial commas. Legitimate SF extrap-

Oh, yuck, my reader, yuck!

Books

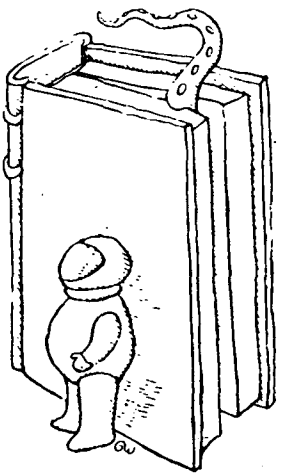
by ALGIS BUDRYS

The Karma Machine, Michael Davidson. Popular Library, $1.25, paper.

The Nemesis of Evil, Lin Carter. Doubleday & Company, Inc., 172pp, with a Note. $5.95

The Fantastic Art of Frank Frazetta, Introduction by Betty Ballantine. Rufus Publications, Appr. 9" x 11" paper, $5.95 as from Rufus/Peacock/Bantam. Available in boards from Charles Scribners'.

Buy Jupiter and Other Stories, Isaac Asimov. Doubleday & Company, Inc., 206 pp, $5.95



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olations all, right?

Well, now, in fact Yeshua is in a hospital room. (We'll soon learn that all the other furniture is made of "stainless steel and black rubber tubing," and apparently only that. The "air bed" is in fact some sort of repulsor ray cushion. For some reason, people can rest their full weight on repulsor rays for months or even years and not get bed sores). The use of "glide in" is Amitabha's quaint way of saying "Reveille!"

Now, it seems reasonable to me that any story introducing characters named Yeshua and Amitabha in Scene 1 has already asked as much of the reader as can be expected in the first five sentences. Scene 1 in any narrative is the place where the reader is lighting the bare stage, helping pull scenery and props into place while thumbing through the program, and tentatively chalking-in the action while finding someplace to stow one's galoshes.

It's a tough go for the poor ticketholder, who has not only paid to be exposed to drama but has volunteered to act on behalf of management to the best of one's ability. An author's use of an unprecedented euphemism for "Wake up" is an egregious piece of obscuration; to couple it with a confusingly named piece of furniture, an inaccurately named piece, and furthermore a piece which cannot work as the author gratuitously says it does, is to tell the reader his runaway balloon is stuck in an elevator on the 40th floor of the Forest of Arden.

You will also have noticed the "white-robed" technicians. In hindsight, this confident grasp of cliche — repeated in the case of the stainless steel and rubber tubing ... excuse me, black rubber tubing, like at the gas station ... er, that is, Neoprene tubing — this cocksure grasp of cliche accounts for the use of "hovering over." The author does not in fact want you to picture Amitabha hunting restlessly about a central target in the manner of a dragonfly, hummingbird, or ladies' maid in a Frankenstein movie. Amithaba, Amibatha, or however his name would fall more readily from the Western tongue, is a serene, all-knowing guru who has obviously seen *Lost Horizon* many times.

Cliche writers can be depended on not to read what they are writing; they are deaf to language. My pet effect of this is the frequent pornographic scene in which the heroine unbares her bosom. That has always struck me as a disservice to the reader, although it's easily possible to deduce what the author intended, and to go right on salivation. But this ability by the reader to complete a leap while one's partner is falling is dependent

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on knowing where the narrative is supposed to culminate. What we have in *The Karma Machine*, as in any novel with larger pretensions, or as in almost any SF novel, is a story with some features that no one but the author can predict.

What *The Karma Machine* is, by the way, is a pseudonymous utopian novel by a professor of comparative religion; it is the thoughtful distillation of an educated individual's best attempt to send the world a better message. It is 280 closely-printed pages in this edition, and must represent years of hard work. Now it represents countless largely wasted reader hours — although nowhere near as many as required to make it a success, I'm sure — and some sort of bafflement for the professor, who dropped such a precious stone into the well and got back a splash no louder than the one raised by the next man's casual bottlecap.

All right, then, is "bad writing" proportionate in some way to "predictability"? I don't think it's as easy as that. Look:

"Swan Lake" also represents a lot of hard work, and results from much complex reasoning by choreographer, composer, principal dancers, chorus, production designer, arranger, orchestra, conductor — all those things which author and reader are together. The story of Swan Lake is now familiar worldwide; it is always the same story at every performance, whether at the Bolshoi or at the young ladies' dance academy in the suburbs. But only mommies attend the graduation recital at Miss Fenster's.

And yet, what are *tour jete* and *entrechat* but standardized individual strokes on their way toward a predictable completion? For a person of our days, who knows all about the evil influence on princes and their crossbows, what can be the difference that produces only a pattering of Winnetka matrons in one auditorium, and in another a *hazarra* of Slavs beating their palms bloody at the sight of beauty in Mankind?

Language is a tool, all right. But you cannot extract beauty from a packing case even though it's stamped "Magic Lantern." A story is not a packing case even when it has blurbs on it. A story is a ballet.

A Doc Savage novel, now, is a ballet for Doc and the rest of the dwarves. Consider this cast of characters:

"Scorchy" Muldoon: the hot-tempered Hibernian, whose love of fighting is matched only by his skill. Nick Naldini: the ex stage magician and master of sleight of hand, who now used his ingenuity on behalf of Zarkon and the cause of justice. "Ace" Harrigan: a top-

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flight aviator rescued from the brink of suicide by Zarkon and now his dedicated pilot. "Doc" Jenkins: the mental giant with total recall, who acts as the ambulatory computer for the Omega organization. And my personal favorite among the supporting Omega members: "Menlo" Parker, the gruff electronics wizard and kung fu expert, whose constant grumbling masks a total dedication to Zarkon and the ideal of goodness ....

The extraordinary Omega organization is of course centered on its strange, vastly resourceful leader, Prince Zarkon of Novenia, whose shadowy origins must remain a secret forever, from all of mankind ....

(The syntax, solecisms, and even the ellipses are all quotes from the jacket copy for *The Nemesis of Evil*, first of the three "Zarkon, Lord of the Unknown" original novels written by Lin Carter and published by Doubleday).

Carter has created nothing less than a tour de force. This book faithfully duplicates the character-series novels of the 1930s as nothing else has ever done. A serious student of fantasy, a pulp afficionado since at least the early 1940s, author and editor for many a year, Carter could have a job as one of the Kenneth Robesons tomorrow if Street & Smith were still a going concern. This thing is perfect. Carter tells you that the book is "as told to," that the world must never know Zarkon's secret origins, that he will tell you those secret origins in the course of this "non-fiction novel" modeled on Capote's *In Cold Blood* technique, that when he tells you it is incumbent on you not to tell another soul, and that in order to make assurance doubly sure, he has made up these fictitious secret origins, and that the character of Zarkon in no way resembles the character who actually told him this story and the real secret origins.

Now there, by any standard, is a chef concocting a sublime *oeuvre*. Unreservedly recommended. The introduction alone is worth the price of the entire work.

To understand what lies behind cliche — what yearnings it fulfills, what things it speaks to — is to proceed from complication toward simplicity, from mere predictability to promise fulfilled. Frank Frazetta is not as good an artist, *qua* artist, as some people make him out to be. He is a good — not great — draftsman; a passable anatomist, a creator whose 1967 work can be more all-of-a-piece than his 1975, or vice-versa; thus a man who has apparently attained his level and will not significantly improve on it.

But he comes from a time when

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most illustrators had never taken the trouble to study formal drawing at all; when perspective was replaced by something called camera angle, when a man was a fool for being a subtle colorist, and when only a few people expected there was any future in being otherwise.

That was the tide against which Frazetta swam, and it ain't easy. *The Fantastic Art of Frank Frazetta* shows the result. In 33 beautifully engraved color plates and a score of ink drawings, this book is a feast for the fantasy art fan's eyes. Moody, at times brooding, at times violent, each of the situations in these pieces of art has its sense that the people in them were alive a moment before, and will have further thoughts in the next moment; that a frame of time is frozen here, rather than that someone has flashed a billboard. The tension in some of these compositions is nearly unbearable; the action depicted in others is taking place while the crack of tension broken still echoes.

This is the stuff we look for in our dreams, and it is what an artist knows we want. The very best thing about Frazetta is not his technique, which, despite the studies and the years, and its likability, is simply not up to Bolshoi standards. It is his awareness that technique *must* be; that grace and the appearance of spontaneity result from pains taken and from nothing else half so well. That's what's rare in him, and precious.

And of course this is a marvelous book to let us see that; a good introduction by Betty Ballantine makes it better.

The plates are 7" x 9 3/8" and were done by Regensteiner; the $5.95 price of the slick-stock, softcover edition must mean it comes very close to being a money-loser. There is a hardcover edition from Scribner's, for your coffee table; the paper edition comes from a consortium called Rufus Publications/Peacock Press/Bantam Books, and I assume that somewhere in that group is an accountant, but I assume also they put a sock in his mouth.

Buy Jupiter and Other Stories continues the format of *The Early Asimov*, and for that reason alone a person might contemplate giving Doubleday its asked-for $5.95 for this 206-page volume. We get, first of all, 24 Asimov short stories, and then a corresponding number of short biographical essays that tell us not only how and where these stories were written but something more about the man who wrote them, and the world of pulp SF.

Isaac is in many ways the ideal of the professor who wrote *The Karma Machine*, I think. Asimov is

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a man with a tenacious grasp of data, and that is essentially his specialty; he can tell you about comparative religion, mathematics, paleontology, astrophysics, English literature, humor, botany, and Isaac Asimov, among other complex subjects. It is a broad-spectrum narrow specialty, this business of taking what you would like to know and conveying it to you in a form you have time and capacity to undertake.

And I think, in looking over these pieces of fiction in this volume at hand, and comparing them or mating them to their accompanying essays, it is increasingly clear that the sole author has a single philosophy of communication, and that Phrase Two of the last sentences of the preceding paragraph describes it.

The Good Doctor — I am the Passing Reviewer — sees a story as a message no different from an article, or such stories as "Let's Not" or "Silly Asses" would never have been generated. In reading them, a man like "Michael Davidson" has a right to ask in what way Naron of the long-lived Rigellian race is an inhabitant of "good writing" if Amitabha the guru is not.

It is a fair question, even if I did ask it myself. It is a question furthermore obscured by the fact that Asimov, like many another popular and worthy writer, is a workmanlike prosaist, and that's it. That's enough, but it's always much easier to descry "excellence" in prose when its author verges often on poetry. Where is the good writer in Asimov — where is the thing which reminds its audience that there is some degree of angel in us all? Why, like him, are other people "good writers" who nevertheless use phrases like 'there was nothing else to do while life remained.'

Well, for one thing, it's a clear statement of a conclusion that almost everyone comes to now and then. A universal. A clear and essentially unimprovable statement. Though Ernest Hemingway would probably have called the last three words redundant,* and cut them, the fact is they occur early in the story ("Founding Father") and represent the third — and last — time the author clearly tells the reader that these five men are doomed.

It was Aristotle (who has contributed much to SF in several ways) who said, essentially: 'What I tell you three times is true.' I don't think Isaac counts on his fingers as he lays down opening situations, any more than most professionals do. But I will tell you that editors, trying to pin down a lack of

An irony, and not necessarily irrelevant.

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believability in an otherwise plausible situation, will go in there and check to see if the Rule of Three has been followed. There is of course no genre in which it's *more* important.

This is not "formula." It is a storyteller's understanding of what makes the campfire tale valuable to its audience; what receptors within the mind have now been opened so that the day's hard defenses are laid aside. The spell is being cast. The ways of commerce are put by, the small irascibilities of social friction steal away. Life is a twine of varicolored cords snarled up from everywhere; all that remains of one's attempts to travel in the labyrinth. Here now one silver thread. See now the foreground figure stir to life, and now, in due time, here's another. The background's properly displayed as such; the spotlights linger longest on that which is central. There's no confusion here, no doubt of what's important and what's not.

The storyteller knows a hundred ways to reach the human heart — he learned them from his own. It's not enough to have a tale worth telling. It's not enough to know that here the feet should turn *thus*, that one should rise on the toes at *this* beat ... assuming one knows even that much .... It's not enough. Only the position just so, flowing into the next; the fractional, schooled hesitation that makes more of the beat than Miss Fenster ever tried to teach; the elevation of finger that gives new meaning to the line of the torso.

At the Bolshoi, knees do not knock, and the *danseuse* does not gaze out into the audience, finger to lip for reassurance. She does not, in fact, exist — her motions exist, and so pellucid that the heart finds the story. *Swan Lake* — not swan hash.

Samuel R. Delany reports that Bantam Books is not allowing him to make running changes in his novel, *Dhalgren*. He has also furnished a convincing list of typographical errors, dating back from Bantam's alleged failure to furnish him with a promised set of galley proofs before publication. Mr. Delany's statement is contrary to information given us by Bantam and relayed to our readers while reviewing that book. The apparent evidence is on Delany's side, and we apologize to him. — AJB

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Gordon Eklund ("The Treasure in the Treasure House," August 1974; "Sandsnake Hunter," March 1975) returns with a mordant tale about a society that allows its personalities to be changed as easily as we allow our fashions to be changed.

Changing Styles

by GORDON EKLUND

"Tom, please," Anita Keating said, tugging impatiently at her husband's sleeve, "do let's hurry."

"Hurry?" Tom Keating said, yawning with undisguised boredom. He dug his heels into the plush carpet that stretched from wall to wall across the wide corridor and opened his fingers and let a smoldering cigarette drop to the floor. "Why in heaven's name should we hurry?"

"Because I want to get a good place to see. Because I don't want to miss anything. Because it's been four years, and, Tom, this used to be my whole life. Please try to understand."

"Well, I don't," he said. "It simply doesn't make sense to me. If you want to find out what the new style is, then watch the evening scan sheets like everyone else. I can't see any reason for coming here and subjecting ourselves to a mob."

"I don't care about the style. That isn't it. This is something I want to see."

"Look," he said, his voice taking on a distinctly irritated tone. He pointed a finger to the place where, at the end of the corridor, a pair of huge high doors stood open wide. A steady, if not dense, stream of people was already passing through this gap and entering the main hotel ballroom which lay beyond. It was here, shortly, where the annual Arthur Davis unveiling would be taking place. "That," Tom said, "constitutes a crowd. And I — as you are fully aware — loathe crowds."

"Don't be stupid," she said, losing patience with his ridiculous style. "You haven't been near a crowd since we left Earth."

"That doesn't mean I can't loathe them. And —" he lit another cigarette, flinging the match to the carpet "— I do."

"Oh, you loathe everything."

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She reached out, trying to grab his arm, but he was too quick for her and managed to hide his hands behind his back before she could catch them. Nita took a step forward, sorely tempted to go on without him. This dreadful style of Tom's was something he had contracted while visiting Ganymede two years before. Tom was convinced it served him well in his work — he was a diplomat — and all her arguing had so far failed to convince him otherwise. In fact, that was one of the reasons she had insisted that he accompany her here today. She wanted him exposed to whatever fashion was presently the trend in hopes that the excitement of the occasion might rub off and persuade him to convert to a more suitable style. In fact, now that they were finally home on Earth, she was seriously beginning to consider leaving him for good. Two constant years of his bored pseudo-aristocratic yawnings had been irritating enough in the outworlds; here on civilized Earth she wasn't sure she could stand two weeks of it. And, besides, Tom was already saying he was bored with Earth and wanted to head back out. She wasn't ready for the savage life quite so soon — might not be ready for a long while — and the only way she might force him to see her point of view was to get him to convert.

But Tom, at the moment, was easily managing to ignore her rising anger. He said, "All things ought to be loathed. I have yet to find an exception to that rule, so that when I say all things I mean everything. He smiled at what he seemed to feel was a joke. "And I most certainly do include this ridiculous crowd." He raised his cigarette and took a puff.

Reaching swiftly out, Nita caught his arm. She laughed triumphantly in his face. Glowering, Tom struggled weakly but soon let his arm grow limp and unresisting. Then she was able to swing the arm over her shoulder and, pulling on the wrist as if it were a hauling rope, draw him forward. He stuck his cigarette between his teeth and blew thick clouds of dark smoke at the back of her neck. She started coughing and had trouble breathing. There certainly were times when she truly wished Tom were something, someone else. Even though she loved him, she hated his stupid style. But she was determined not to let him spoil her day. It was too important for that.

"Well, here we are," she said, as they passed through the wide doorway. She released his arm, and as she had hoped, he soon waddled forward and stood beside her. Ahead of them, clear across the enormous length of the room,

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surrounded by a thin ribbon of early arrivals, stood the long wooden walkway. The bright polished surface gleamed and glimmered beneath the fierce light shining from above. Tassles of gold and silver dangled from the ceiling, transforming the pathway into a place of mystery and enchantment, things half seen or unseen. Tears came to Nita's eyes, and she sighed loud and long, a combination of excitement, nostalgia, and — she willingly admitted this to herself — envy.

It had been such a very long time.

"I loathe this place," Tom was saying at her side.

Nita didn't see how she could help being nervous now that she was actually here. As she led Tom toward the cardboard ticket booth, she began to shiver from the tension and anticipation of the moment. Although Tom didn't know it, the fact was that it was more than sheer coincidence that their return to Earth after four years among the outworlds had happened to fall just a week short of an Arthur Davis unveiling. She had, on Titan, scheduled their return with deliberate calculation, intending to arrive neither too soon nor too late, and had then bluntly told Tom that all the other flights were full. As a lie, it was barely transparent, easily seen, yet poor Tom's style had forbidden him sufficient energy to assay even the most casual attempt at exposure. That was when, for surely the first and most likely the only time, Nita had blessed the stars above in their great wisdom for providing Tom with his chosen style. While he yawned, she schemed, and that, at the time, seemed more than fair.

Nonetheless, it had been nine years. Nine plus four came to thirteen. When it began, she had been eighteen; so that came to thirty-one total. Thirty-one years old, with nine of those years — the best! — spent as Arthur Davis's chief model. She had been Nita Blue, trendsetter for two entire worlds. Her income back then was fifth highest in the Union; Arthur's ranked second. Nine years which had ended exactly fours years ago this very night. What had changed since then? They had, of course — all of them. But not she. She even retained the same style she had worn and modeled that final night. Arthur had dubbed it "the virginal essence of innocence and purity." Well, it wasn't really that any more. She had changed that much — no denying there. A converted personality was no less malleable than any other. Still, she thought she would have to wear this personality till the very day she died. It didn't matter to her in the

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least what Medra wore tonight. She gave less than a single darn, as ignorant today of present styles as she had been ignorant of all else four years ago. In all her time out there, she had never once — never — sneaked a peak at a fashion sheet. Since arriving back, she had not left their room, thirty-seven stories up in this same hotel. Let Medra show what she wished, Nita would not be moved. Medra was to fashion what some claimed Allah was to deities, the one and only true god. But in that Nita Keating was a devout athiest, wholly confirmed in her faith.

"Why, it is you. I can hardly believe — Nita Blue."

She smiled back at the hunched man in the cardboard booth. She guessed she must know him — one of Arthur's regular employees — should remember him. She didn't. "You mean you actually remember me," she said.

"No one has ever forgotten you, Nita," said the man. "Why, you were a gorgeous thing, incredible and near-divine. May I —?"

"Of course."

The man extended his hand. Nita took it and shook it solemnly.

"I'm proud," he said, gazing at his hand with an expression of genuine awe.

"Does Arthur remember me, too?" she asked.

"Does he?" The man laughed derisively. "If he ever forgot, it would mean he was dead, for it could happen no other way."

"Does he still speak of me?"

"Constantly, constantly. In the most —" the man's tiny arms fluttered, searching the air for the proper words "— the most glowing terms."

"I can hardly believe that."

"Oh, he adores you. That's the truth."

Tom was pushing at her from behind, trying to shove past and present their tickets. But she couldn't move — not yet — and so stood rigidly fast, bathing in the glory of the little man's glowing words. A sudden and fantastic vision came upon her: the little man was not simply lying out of kindness, respect, and past acquaintance. In fact, later in the day, it would all happen to her exactly as he hinted. Arthur Davis would come to her. Medra had failed — bombed. Nita, Nita, he would beg, you must come back. Please, please, please. Arthur would promise her the world and its moon in return for her whispered *yes*.

But she would say no, never, and leave him dying.

"Nita, please. These tickets. I really should —"

"Oh, Tom," she said, but stepped aside at last. Oh, yes, she thought, as he rushed past her, it

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was wonderful being here. Why, she wasn't even shaking any more. She was happy. It was happening just as she had always hoped.

They did remember. They did know her. In their hearts, she lingered, a living memory. The greatest of them all: Nita Blue!

The shots burst out behind them. Nita did not recognize the sound, but Tom grabbed her arm at once and drew her immediately down toward the carpet. They fell together, and the shots came again — *crack, pop, bang*. She screamed, realizing what it must be, and Tom threw himself on top of her. Nita, still screaming, fought him. She wanted to see what was going on, but Tom kept twitching with each new shot, and all she could see were the buttons on his coat. Finally, she shoved him slightly aside and caught a fleeting glimpse of two men near the ticket booth. Each held a bulky black object in his hand. Then fire and smoke leaped from one of the objects, and there was the sound of a shot. Tom twitched. Now Nita noticed a third person, a girl, lying on the floor. Her chest seemed oddly speckled with big red spots.

Two more shots came, Tom twitching with each. Then silence.

When that got to be unbearable, Tom moved away at last. He stood, then helped Nita up.

Across the room both of the men she had noticed earlier were lying on the floor. They, too, were covered with dark red splotches.

Tom was yawning uncontrollably, a certain indication something was deeply bothering him. Nita jerked his hand away from his lips. "Tom, those people, are they —"

"Dead?" He nodded carefully. "I believe they are." He kept yawning, even without the hand. "It would seem as if —"

"They killed each other!" she cried. "With guns!"

"Yes." Nodding and yawning. "Yes, didn't I tell you? It seems to be the style now."

Two uniformed policemen entered the room and casually scooped up the bodies and began removing them. Spots of blood remained plainly upon the carpet, but no one made an effort to clean the stains.

Nita turned her head away. She was noticing the crowd for the first time and beginning to understand.

Tom was right. It was — it had to be — the style.

The entire room was incredibly still. Except for the low hum of mechanical music flowing from the walls, the sound of an occasional hushed footstep, a word or two from the man in the ticket booth to his line of customers, everything was powerfully silent.

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And it had been that way when they entered. It was no different now.

And no wonder, she thought, staring into the mass of the crowd. Nobody was talking for the simple reason that they could not. There was no one to talk to — everyone was alone. There were no groups of people, not even any couples. If a man and woman arrived together, then they separated the instant they passed the ticket booth. Each person in the vast ballroom — as many as a hundred or more people by now — occupied a distinct and certain portion of space, and none willingly permitted another to invade that chosen terrain.

Tom, taking her hand, led Nita forward, brushing through occupied precincts. They attracted many hostile glares and angry mutters. An occasional nervous hand darted toward a pocket or belt. Nita thought she glimpsed handguns and knives. She held close to Tom, shut her eyes, let him lead.

Finally, she couldn't stand it. "Tom, I'm afraid. I've never seen anything like this before."

"Oh, bother them," he said, his boredom apparent. "If we're here, we may as well get a good view." Waving at the distant walkway, he continued to pull her ahead. They passed very close to an elderly man, who suddenly drew a knife with incredible speed and waved it in their faces. In his style, Tom merely nodded, yawned, and glided effortlessly past. Nothing short of death itself would ever cut through his stubborn boredom. Good fortune tagged their path. Soon enough, they reached the edge of the polished walkway and paused. Nita breathed deeply. She was shaking again but not from tension or nostalgia — she was afraid.

"Tom," she said, "what is it? What's gone wrong here?"

He could only shrug and mutter, plainly disinterested, "It's simply a trend, I imagine. Another silly fad."

But Nita Keating could not remain standing here forever. Her style would never permit her to do that. It was too strong, calling upon her to move, to be active, to run and romp and stomp and perk. It was all she could do to resist the urge to run free, her hands waving high.

More and more people kept filing into the ballroom. But the unveiling seemed no nearer to starting than ever. Arthur Davis had always refused to be imprisoned by the hands of a clock. The stage where the walkway ended — the place where Medra would surely first appear — remained quite empty. At one point a bunch of workmen swept suddenly into

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the room, carrying their tools to the line of converters that covered one wall; and for a time they worked vigorously, banging hammers and burning torches; but when they left, nothing seemed to have changed. She sighed. Tom could stand in one place till all of time ran out. His dullness afforded him a peculiar perseverance. But her style allowed no such luxury.

Finally, she said, "Tom, I've got to go."

"Go? Where? Not home?"

"No, just for a walk. There must be someone here I know."

"But do you think it's safe?"

"Just try to hold a place for me."

He scratched his chin, pondering. "Do you think that's really necessary?"

"No," she admitted, stepping relentlessly back, not wanting to be reminded of the ugly hostility surrounding her everywhere. As she pedaled backward, the crowd split neatly in two with the fatalism of the Red Sea parting at Moses's behest. Turning at last, bowing her head to escape their suspicious eyes, she finally reached a relatively open place near the middle of the room.

She paused here, lifting her eyes. Suddenly, she heard gunshots. She jumped, cocking her head to identify the direction of the sounds. They came again — three additional shots — from the doorway. Her path determined, she hurried in the opposite direction. Two further shots cracked out. How many times did that make now? A dozen separate bursts at least — gunfire. Why, only moments ago, two men standing just a few yards from her and Tom had gone at each other with flashing knives. The sight of real blood spilled upon the carpet — and so close — had nearly been more than she could bear. She remembered screaming and screaming, attracting angry glares, till Tom had grabbed her mouth and forced her to be silent.

"Why, Mary, is it you?" said Nita, reaching out with spontaneous pleasure to clasp a pair of familiar hands. "I haven't been so glad to see another person since —"

The woman fell back in a sudden whirl of motion, one hand waving crazily through the air.

With a start, Nita realized that was a gun coming down toward her.

She screamed and hit the floor. She threw her hands over her head just as a shot banged out. She cried, "No! Mary! It's me — Nita Blue! Don't — please!"

"Nita Blue," said a slow, dead voice from above. Then more firmly: "Don't move."

But Nita had to look, at least. Had she made a mistake? Glancing

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up, she saw — no, yes — it was Mary Dunne. Why, she had barely changed at all in four years — as slim and pale and ethereal as ever. Mary had always been the most beautiful model of them all, though lacking something else, personality, projection. The two of them had entered the business nearly at the same moment, and Nita had barely been chosen over Mary as Arthur Davis's primary model. As a result of that, there had always been a bit of envy between them — at least on Mary's part — but never anything like this. Why, this was murder.

Mary Dunne held her gun pointed firmly at Nita's skull.

"Now, Mary," Nita said, straining to keep her voice calm and soft. "Maybe you've forgotten me. I'm Nita — remember? Nita Keating."

"I do recall a woman who bore that name," said Mary, her voice cold and distant. "But she isn't here. She's in the outworlds with her husband. So that means you can't be her." In emphasis, the gun twitched.

"But I'm back, Mary. Look over there. See. It's Tom. We've both come back."

Shaking her head, Mary laughed bitterly. The gun continued to quiver in a dangerous way. "You must think I'm a real fool. Do you really think I'm going to turn around and look behind me? That's really the dumbest trick in the book. I don't know who you are, but it isn't Nita Blue."

"But I am. I'm Nita. Honestly. Isn't there some way I can prove it to you?"

"Oh, now I see." A smile crossed Mary's face. The expression made Nita realize how tremendously mistaken she had been. Mary had indeed changed — and changed in ways perhaps not immediately apparent but which ran very deep. Mary Dunne, the most beautiful model in the world, had become a dreadful and vicious beast. "A disguise," Mary was saying. "That must be it. And a good one, too. Thinking you could fool me. Thinking you were really Nita. Drop my guard. Then you could draw, shoot, kill." With each word, her voice rose higher and higher, stretching toward some hysterical breaking point. "Well, you were wrong. I'm not the fool you thought I was. I'm too smart for your bunch. And you — you're a dirty, rotten, slimy —" Mary's boot lashed out, the steel toe cracking Nita's upraised fingers. Nita screamed and grabbed her broken hand.

"Mary, please, you must —"

"Stay still!" The gun shook wildly. "Keep your hand away —!"

The shot boomed. Nita screamed, thinking she must be dead.

But it was Mary who groaned

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and Mary who toppled over and Mary who did not move.

Nita sprang away from the falling body and bounded to her feet, poised on her toes. She swung her head in every direction and saw nothing but steel confronting her everyplace. There were guns and knives and swords and razors — all pointed at her.

What could she do?

Run! Turn! Run!

But where? She spun in a frantic circle. No place seemed safe. But she couldn't stand still — that wasn't safe either. There was a killer loose in here. So she ran. Senselessly. Without direction. Wildly. People darted out of her path. Some dropped down. A few drew their weapons. One man aimed carefully. She saw him and zigged. The bullet whizzed past her ear. She screamed and ran on and on — ran till she could run no farther, till the wall rose up and blocked her path and she was forced to wheel and face the immensity of the room like a trapped and cornered beast.

Then someone slapped her. The stinging pain cut through her panic.

She blinked and stared.

A man stood in front of her, small and wiry, with wild unkempt hair and a huge drooping mustache.

Nita fell forward into his arms. She leaned her head against his chest and sobbed with relief. "Oh, Arthur, Arthur. You don't know how glad I am you're here."

Eventually, Arthur pushed her gently away but kept hold of her hand. "Nita Blue. I never guessed it was you." He shook his head in astonishment. "They told me somebody was running wild, but I would never in a million years have thought —"

"Wait, Arthur." She had to interrupt. "Arthur, listen. It was Mary Dunne. Look — over there. The policemen. That's Mary's body. She was going to kill me. She didn't —"

"Mary never did like you," he said. "Jealous of your success."

"But she didn't even know me. She thought I was someone else."

"Oh, I think she knew you." He smiled. "Really, all of us remember you, Nita."

"That's not what I mean." She felt her panic building once again and struggled to control her rising voice. "Please, Arthur, listen. Mary didn't know — she thought I was someone else. And then — then it didn't matter — because somebody killed her."

He shrugged lightly and patted her shoulders. "That's the trend now, Nita."

"But how could —? Arthur, it was just crazy. Insane. Mary was

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completely out of her head."

"No more than any of the rest of them." He laughed suddenly, high and loud. "Everybody in this room is out of their heads in one way or another, and, if you want to hear a secret, I think they always were. It didn't take me or Medra or any other person to make them that way." Leaning forward, he pressed his lips close to her ear and whispered, "That's always excepting me and thee, of course." Straightening up, he tapped her forehead, winked, and laughed loudly. The sound of his voice attracted several hostile glances. He sighed. "They don't like that, either. Laughing always worries them. Come on." He pulled her arm. "We better move on."

She accompanied him passively, unable to resist. This whole thing was turning out crazy, and she felt totally incompetent to fight back.

"Tom here, too?" Arthur asked, as they maneuvered a careful path through the crowd, deliberately avoiding coming too near any one person. Arthur kept his eyes fixed on the floor — except for an occasional upward glance to confirm the rightness of their path — and Nita tried to do likewise.

"He's here." She gestured vaguely in the direction of the walkway.

"Too bad there really isn't time to chat with him. A fascinating fellow, I suppose. Perhaps later — after the unveiling. Right now, there's hardly time for good friends like you."

"Tom is wearing a Kenyon style. The one seven or eight years ago. He contracted it on Ganymede."

Arthur glanced up, showing surprise. "You mean that absurd bored aristocrat routine. I can hardly believe that. The style stunk at the time."

"No, it's true. The outworlders are years and years out of fashion. In fact, most of them don't even wear styles."

"Barbaric." He made a clucking sound with his teeth and tongue. "But — who knows? — maybe that's their good fortune. How about it? Your idea to come here? Or Tom's?"

"Mine. But I wish — I'm starting to wish — maybe I made a mistake."

"Hush. Not so loud." It was necessary for them to pass through the densest part of the crowd. On the other side, once it was safe to lift their eyes, the big stage stood right in front of them. Arthur hopped up, then helped Nita. Together, they crossed to the very rear, where a heavy black curtain hung down. Deep shadows engulfed everything here. "Nobody will bother us," Arthur said. "They're all scared witless of the dark. It's

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safe to talk." He sat on the floor, pulling her down beside him and laying a hand on her knee. "So tell me, then. How's life been?"

"Oh, Arthur, how can you ask that? I can't just chat. Don't you understand? I came this close —" she held up two fingers, pressing them snugly together "— to being murdered. I want to know what's happening here. What's gone wrong with everyone."

He looked puzzled. "Gone wrong? Why, nothing. I thought I explained. It's the new trend."

"What trend?"

"Well, we call it paranoia. Something like that. Most designers are strongly involved with psychology these days, but I do think I've carried it the farthest. The others play around with childish neuroses, while I plunge all the way to the heart of the matter. Medra has been just wonderful, too. I look at it this way: when you can have any personality you want simply by paying the necessary fee, well, then why not something that's at least interesting? The public seems to agree. They love Medra."

"You mean this — this hatred and suspicion — you're the cause?"

"Well, it's really last year's style. In a week, you'll hardly find a dozen in New York."

"I don't care about next week. I want to know about now. And I think — I think it's horrible."

Arthur turned and gave her a suspicious look. "What style are you wearing?"

She told him, though not why.

He smiled broadly. "I expected as much. One thing I ask of you, Nita, and that is don't try to run my business. I only give the public what it wants, what it asks for and demands. I mean, what else do you expect from them? Do you think people are willingly going to spend their whole lives living the virginal essence of innocence and purity? People crave excitement. It's built into them. They like to be weird and kinky, though most don't dare. When you can have any sort of personality, why opt for dullness?"

"I'm not dull."

He patted her knee. "Of course you're not."

"But do you mean —" she pushed his hand away "— everyone is like this now? Everyone in the whole world crazy and suspicious and wanting to kill for no good reason."

He frowned. "Hardly. Four years ago, was everyone in the world just like you? It takes money to be stylish. Fashion isn't a game for cabflyers. My clientele — the policy is no different from when you were here — I am extremely select."

This time Nita couldn't stop herself from laughing. What he was saying was so absurd it had to be a

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joke. "These people? Select? Arthur, I think you're as crazy as the rest of them."

"Nita, please." He shook his head sadly. "I wish you wouldn't feel it necessary to carry on this way." He climbed to his feet, as if preparing to go, but then paused and looked down at her. "Nita, I don't want to have to bear a grudge. I think I know what's really bothering you, and I hope you'll understand that I understand, too. So I'll tell you what. I can't replace Medra. That's out. She's too good and too popular. But what I can do is offer you a job as a subsidiary. Medra loathes traveling; so next month when we take our show around the world — Europe and Asia and everywhere, the four corners — you can be it. If, that is —" he smiled "— you feel you can handle the new styles."

"Arthur, I don't want to handle your new styles."

"But — but —" She had shocked him so deeply he could not speak.

While he sputtered, Nita got slowly to her feet and went away, She felt dead and empty inside, as if she had wakened one bright and beautiful morning only to discover that the world had ended during the night and that she was the last, lonely remnant of the entire human race.

She came to the edge of the stage, bounded off, and started across the ballroom floor.

Then, without warning, the lights dimmed. She stopped. The music from the walls ceased flowing. And a dead voice came instead:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to announce the incipient arrival of that moment for which we have all been waiting. I mean, of course, that Medra is about to appear. All you need do is watch the central walkway — watch carefully — and you will be numbered among the select few to actually witness the initial unveiling of this year's latest style. Afterward, our converters will be prepared to respond to your immediate contracts once you have inserted a credit ticket punched to the level of $135,000. In behalf of Arthur Davis and Medra, I would like to thank you for being here today, and now — please — let us watch together."

Nita glanced frantically toward the walkway, but nothing seemed to be happening yet. It was so very dark in here. *Tom, Tom,* she thought. *Where are you? We have to get out of this ghastly place.*

Turning, she ran toward the area where she thought she had left him.

But the announcement of Medra's impending arrival had affected the crowd dramatically; they seemed transformed. The ugly

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hostility melted instantly away, and, in mass, the mob rushed forward, enclosing the walkway and trapping Nita. Flesh touched flesh, and people actually turned and spoke to each other, creating a growing murmur throughout the room that sounded like the contented purring of an enormous cat. Anticipation flowed through the air like electricity during a lightning storm.

Caught, nearly trapped, Nita could barely squeeze through them. "Tom," she kept calling. "Tom, where are you? It's Nita — I'm here."

Suddenly, upon the stage, a light beamed. A thousand heads — including Nita's — swiveled in unison. She stared at the wide round spot of yellow light upon the empty stage.

Then, all at once, as if materializing out of the bare substance of the air, a figure appeared within the circle of light.

It had to be Medra herself.

She was a young woman, demurely dressed in a billowing, ankle-length gown. Her hair had been drawn up and tied in a tight bun upon the crown of her head. She wore no make-up anywhere.

Her eyes, wide and round and glassy, stared straight into emptiness.

The murmuring ceased. The room was utterly silent. Even Nita caught and held her breath.

As for Medra, she did not appear to be breathing at all.

Abruptly, two uniformed attendants crept into the circle of light. Each took one of Medra's arms and drew her forward. Together, the three of them moved down the long walkway. Medra took short, rigid steps. When the attendants moved away and no longer pulled on her arms, then she came to a sudden, dead stop.

One of the men raised her left arm until it stood perpendicular to her body. Then he turned to the crowd, smiled as if to say *look here*, then released the arm.

It remained rigidly in place.

Then both men led her forward again.

When Medra came opposite, Nita tried to meet her eyes, not understanding the significance of this style, and was stunned by what she saw. Why, this poor woman could have been dead. She hardly seemed to be breathing. One of the attendants took a long straight pen and jabbed the tip into Medra's extended arm. She didn't flinch, didn't cry out, didn't even seem to notice.

When Medra reached the end of the walkway, her attendants turned her swiftly around and led her back towards the stage. When they passed, Nita deliberately averted her eyes.

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As they reached the edge of the stage, the circle of light, which had obediently followed them during the course of their journey, snuffed suddenly out.

And they were gone.

Now the dead voice returned: "That, ladies and gentlemen, was our new style, unveiled and modeled for you by Medra herself. We wish to assure you this fashion is wholly consistent, credible, and compatible, the result of a full year's careful research, study, and development. Arthur Davis has chosen to dub this, his newest and grandest creation, "The Zombie," although the proper medical term — a very rare mental disorder no longer prevalent in our society — is catatonia. The special rate presently available is, I repeat, a mere $135,000."

The moment the voice ceased speaking, the stampede began. The crowd wheeled stiffly in mass and, moving on silent feet, rushed toward the wall of converters. No one was speaking. Each person walked rigidly and mechanically as if, unofficially, everyone had already adopted the year's new style.

Nita snapped out of her own private trance. She spun about, shouting, "Tom — no! Don't do it! Wait for me! Please, Tom, Please!"

Desperately, she raced through the room, seeking Tom, hunting that one particular face but finding and discarding a hundred others. There was no hostility here now, only mute passivity. The row of converters hummed and flashed as each new contractee stepped inside. After several minutes, an attendant entered the booth and removed the new man, escorting him from the ballroom and then disappearing.

"Tom, Tom, where are you? Please, Tom, answer me."

Her voice boomed hollowly through the vast silence of the room.

Finally, an attendant came over and grabbed her arm. "Hold it a moment, please."

"Let go of me." She squirmed, but his grip was firm. "Let go."

"Is something the matter, miss?" He smiled helpfully. "Is there something I can do? If you wish to try the converters, I would be happy to assist —"

"I don't want that. I want my husband — I'm looking for him."

"Oh, you needn't worry. We'll see that he's delivered home safe and secure. You, too, if you wish. It's written right into your contract. Necessary services are guaranteed for a period not to exceed —"

The myriad and horrible frustrations of this awful homecoming finally exploded. Nita threw back her fist and lashed out, striking the attendant squarely on the jaw.

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He didn't even blink. Catching both her wrists in one of his big hands, he led her toward the big doors. "I'm afraid you'll have to wait for him out here."

"I won't — I won't."

"Ah, but you must. Can't permit a disturbance on a day like today. Surely you understand."

"No, I don't understand. I don't understand any of this. Maybe you can tell me. What's gone wrong with this stupid world?"

Outside the high, wide doors, the attendant let her go and bustled back inside. Alone, Nita stood where he had left her, knowing if she tried to go back in they would only throw her out again, but wanting Tom more than ever in her life. Why, she was actually crying. Tears ran streaks down both her cheeks. She felt silly and stupid but couldn't make herself stop for a minute.

A short distance from where she stood, the new stylepacers came marching out into the real world, led by their personal attendants. They walked rigidly, arms motionless, knees stiff and legs straight. She wished she had a pin. She wished she could just take it and jab every one of them until they at least shed a few drops of blood, so that she could prove to herself — if never to them — that they were really only human beings.

Suddenly, a hand tapped her shoulder. Startled, she turned immediately.

It was Tom. "Ah, here you are at last." His mouth was full and he was chewing loudly. "Went out to get a bite to eat and must have missed the whole thing."

She cried, "Tom!" and threw herself forward into his arms.

"There, there," he said, patting her heaving shoulders. "I'm glad you missed me, dear, but don't you think this is rather excessive?"

"No," she said, backing off and taking his hand. "Not a bit." She gazed lovingly into his dull, flat eyes. Then, nearly at a run, she took off down the long corridor, drawing him behind.

In the elevator, as they rose toward the distant unseen sky, she said, "Then you didn't see any of it?"

He chuckled, lighting one of his cigarettes. "Believe it or not, nothing. Isn't that funny? I missed the whole thing."

"You didn't get to see Medra."

He shook his head. "But, having seen you, who needs her?"

She smiled happily.

"Well," he said, when she did not speak, "is it going to be a big secret? What was it? The new style?"

"Oh, it was nothing you would have cared for." The elevator doors faded back and they stepped into

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the corridor. "It was —" she squeezed his hand "— an utter bore."

He yawned. "Frankly, I expected as much."

"When are we leaving?" she said suddenly, as they stopped before their room.

"Whenever you want. This place really isn't my cup of tea any more."

"Tomorrow?" she asked, as they stepped inside.

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Thayer Waldo ("The Lunatick," March 1974) demonstrates an ability to take on big concepts in entertaining fashion with this story about alien invasion and the day all sound on Earth came to an end.

A Stillness At Sordera

by THAYER WALDO

"Senor," the international operator said, "there will be on your call to San Franceesco a delay of twenty minutes or maybe one 'alf hour."

Nice voice, cute accent, pretty face. *"Gracias chula,"* I said. She dimpled fleetingly before the little screen went blank.

I went back to mixing my *mezcal* highball: distilled cactus juice, a splash of grapefruit soda, mineral water. Then I settled into the *equipal* with it and John Paddock's last-century work on Mesoamerican anthropology, alongside the desk where the videophone was.

When I took a swallow of my drink, the fat ice cubes clinked against each other and the glass. They tinkled again as I set the glass down.

Perhaps two minutes later I picked up the glass a second time. Once more the ice hit the side of the glass. Only this time there was no sound.

The text had engrossed me; it may have taken as much as five seconds for that to register. When it did I looked at the glass, shook it a couple of times so the ice bounced off one surface after another. There was no sound. I put the glass on the desk, hard. Silence.

I plucked the phone from its cradle; no sound. After that I stomped across the room and slammed the bathroom door. Neither action registered audibly.

So I sat back down and made myself think. I had never heard of instant deafness, but what else? I tried to recall someone in the family who had lost his hearing. None occurred to me.

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Then I remembered something, and my mouth said "Goddammit!" though my voice was still. *They'll get the call to Kathleen through, ring you, and you'll never know it.* I grabbed a sheet of hotel stationery from the desk drawer and scrawled in Spanish:

Apparently I have gone stone-deaf. I have placed a person-to-person call to San Francisco, California. Will you please take it for me, explain that I had to go out unexpectedly and will call back this evening? Many thanks.

After signing it, I hesitated, then added a postscript:

Can you inform me of a good doctor in town, if possible a hearing specialist?

With the paper in hand I went out and down the corridor, fast.

At the turn just before the stairs, I almost fell over Petronia, the fat brown chambermaid. She was down on the uneven tiles, rocking side to side, mouth open wide, big tears rolling off her cheeks.

I backed up a step, got her streaming eye, signaled that I couldn't hear, spread my hands and jerked my head in interrogation. Petronia just nodded despairingly and began to shake harder.

Since this was getting us nowhere, I kept on down the stairs. On the landing I stopped short. From there you can see almost the whole lobby. It was a very strange sight.

In front of the reception desk Jaime and Lauro, the bellboys, were on their knees, hands clasped. Jaime had his head bowed; Lauro's anguished face was upturned, eyes squeezed shut, lips working spasmodically.

Raul Galvan the manager sat rigidly on the edge of a divan staring at the TV panel. From where I was I couldn't see it.

Five guests were clustered near the patio door. One had a notebook and stylo in hand; another — a woman with gray hair and face to match — stood fingering her mouth which appeared to be out of control.

Behind the sofa where Galvan sat, three others were standing, two men and a girl. She had her face buried in a handkerchief. The men paid no attention to her, their eyes fixed on the screen.

I went on down and over to Raul. He didn't see me at once. On the TV was some ancient flickering movie with Spanish subtitles. When Raul did look up, he couldn't seem to focus. It was as if he were suffocating.

I gave him the note, but I couldn't be sure if he really took it in. Then he jumped up waving his arms. He was saying something, or trying to — for now all at once the

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wild suspicion began to fasten on me that maybe I wasn't the only one who had gone deaf or couldn't make a sound.

Just then the panel blanked out. Raul stopped everything and sank back on the divan. Almost at once there appeared the Spanish equivalent of WE HAVE TEMPORARILY LOST OUR SOUND. PLEASE STAND BY. Below that printed announcement a clumsily hand-lettered message read: THE REGENT WILL MAKE A VERY IMPORTANT STATEMENT ON ALL CHANNELS IN A FEW MOMENTS. EVERYONE IS URGED TO WATCH.

One of the men behind the sofa looked around, distraught, caught sight of me and made a despairing gesture toward the panel. It triggered contemptuous exasperation in me. *The hell with the gringo cretins who can't trouble themselves to learn word one of the language!* I turned away from him.

Raul had hurried over to where those five guests still stood. He took the one man's writing materials and scribbled a note. It was passed around quickly; as they read, each came running or walking fast toward the TV — except the woman with her hand at her mouth. She just stayed staring off vacantly.

I sat down where I could see the panel. Out on the patio the two hairy mongrels were asleep in the sun. I wondered briefly how they would react when they next tried to bark.

Sixteen persons were crowded around the panel when the Mexican Regent's image flashed on. He was at his desk, hands folded in front of him, very grim. He faced the camera full on, not blinking, mouth a taut line.

In a few seconds words began running across the bottom of the panel:

MY CO-CITIZENS — AND ALL OTHERS WITHIN RANGE OF THIS TRANSMISSION — I COME BEFORE YOU NOW IN SILENCE BECAUSE, LIKE ALL OF YOU, I CAN NO LONGER MAKE MYSELF HEARD, TO TREAT OF WHAT WELL MAY BE THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY EMERGENCY IN THE HISTORY OF MAN.

Beside me, Raul kept chewing desperately at his lower lip. The Regent bent forward, squinting a little as if he wanted to see us clearly. The message in letter lights went on:

WHAT WE ARE EXPERIENCING IS NOT A LOCAL PHENOMENON. THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE WORLD SOME UNKNOWN FORCE HAS BLOCKED THE NORMAL DISTRIBUTION OF MOLECULES WHICH MAKE UP THE LONGI-

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TUDINAL WAVES THAT CARRY SOUNDS TO US. EMINENT SCIENTISTS ARE AT THIS MOMENT INVESTIGATING THE NATURE OF THIS FORCE. I AM IN DIRECT AND PERMANENT CONTACT WITH THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION AT WASHINGTON, AND I WILL BE ADVISED IMMEDIATELY OF THE RESULTS OF THESE INVESTIGATIONS, WHEREVER THESE MAY OCCUR, AS VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA EVERYWHERE ARE BEING COORDINATED TO PROVIDE SIMULTANEOUS EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION.

The figure before us leaned back and lowered his head. The chin-down posture, eyes still on the lens, gave him a brooding lama look. The words skipped along unevenly:

I WISH TO ASK OF EVERYONE NOW WATCHING ME, CALMNESS. I REALIZE FULLY THAT THIS IS A DIFFICULT REQUEST TO ACCEPT IN THE CIRCUMSTANCES, BUT ONLY WITH TRANQUILITY CAN WE MAINTAIN PUBLIC ORDER AND OUR OWN SENSE OF MORAL PURPOSE. I ALSO URGE ALL OF YOU TO HAVE YOUR TELEVISION PANELS PERMANENTLY ACTIVATED. I WILL ADVISE AT ONCE OF ALL DEVELOPMENTS. MEANWHILE, REMEMBER, GOD IS GREAT AND HE HAS NOT DESERTED US.

He faded out. Raul slumped forward, head in hands. Then more words appeared, in English:

FOR THOSE WHO DO NOT UNDERSTAND SPANISH, AN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE VERSION OF THE FOREGOING MESSAGE WILL BE TRANSMITTED IN APPROXIMATELY TEN MINUTES. PLEASE ADVISE ALL TOURISTS AND VISITORS.

I glanced behind me. The man who had sought my help in getting the gist of the first advisory was comforting the sobbing woman. Apparently he hadn't seen what was now on the TV.

I felt somewhat abashed at my own rude conduct. With the issue clarified as to the universality of the phenomenon that had overwhelmed us all, my tensions were not less but differently aligned. It was rather like being told that I had a malignant tumor ... but so did everybody else.

I reached over to pluck at his sleeve. He turned, and the tissues around his small mouth bunched as he saw who it was. I tried to smile ingratiatingly and pointed to the panel.

The man switched his gaze reluctantly as if he were suspicous

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of what I might do if he stopped watching me. But when he saw the message — it had been left on under the station pattern — it galvanized him. He shook his companion by the shoulders, pulling her to make her look up.

When she did at last look up, her streaked face was suddenly transformed as only hope or the climax of sublime love-making can affect a woman's countenance.

The finer details of that walk into town are gone. I was straining myself to make time, composing the text of the dispatch I would send Kathleen, groping for the impossible words that would comfort and reassure. What do you say to the woman you love when you are three thousand kilometers apart and in the space of a heartbeat the whole world has become a place nobody knows?

All I really recall of those twenty minutes or so (my chronometer had been left behind) are a few of the many faces. There was one man especially, old and tall, skin brown as a coffee bean; I think often now of how he looked. While others gaped or wept or wore masks of piteous terror, this *campesino* in his cotton whites was perched on a rock near one corner of a maguey field, watching everything that moved in front of him.

When I came by he fixed his sharp obsidian eyes on me, and he had an unforgettable expression: quizzical, alert, thoroughly composed with the composure of one who has always been in harmony with life through all its willful moods, for whom what was happening now meant only one more capricious quirk, incomprehensible, perhaps, but surely nothing to get uptight about ...

The communications center at Sordera is in the administrative palace facing Miguel Hidalgo Plaza. From the far side of the square I saw the people clustered all around it, spilling out across the deserted wide street that flanked the building. I think my sensory system had by then begun its adaptation; I don't recall that the soundlessness of that swarming scene made my skin crawl or put prickles on my scalp, as first viewing the hotel lobby had. But I was dismayed by the size of the crowd. Absorbed in the message text, I had forgotten to wonder how many would have theirs ready ahead of mine.

I crossed the plaza, where the trees were filled with birds, scarcely a one in movement. As I edged my way into the throng, avoiding bullish tactics (I stand almost two meters tall and weigh a hundred and nine kilos, making me half again as large all around as the average southern Mexican), a woman whose despairing eyes alone

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betrayed her anguish caught at me and pointed toward the center.

There, just inside the doorway, a man was waving a vehement arm in a signal I saw was meant for me. The people saw too and made way, not jostling each other as they pulled aside but maneuvering carefully, gently. Most simply stared up as I passed, the tension that hung in the air like invisible smog showing only now and again on their dark features.

Yet a boy of perhaps twenty, rangy, as swart as any but with coarse sandy hair and light eyes, actually grinned, a jaunty smirk that proclaimed *what-the-hell, this-is-adventure.* It was tonic.

Then I saw the sign, taped high against the left doorjamb. Laborious red crayon letters spelled out in Spanish:

BY ORDER OF THE SUPERINTENDENCY OF COMMUNICATIONS ALL INTERNATIONAL TRAFFIC WILL HAVE PRIORITY WHILE ADDITIONAL DOMESTIC TELEPRINTER CIRCUITS ARE BEING ESTABLISHED.

The man in the office gestured at the sign with an inquiring eye. I made him a responsive gesture combining, *Yes, I read it* with, *Yes, my message is international.* He gave me a form and I wrote:

M'AMANTE — THOUGHTS OF YOU CROWD MY MIND AND LIFT MY HEART. PERHAPS WE ARE ALL AT THE MOMENT OF TRUTH OR SOMETHING. AS SOON AS THIS ODD HIATUS PASSES I WILL CALL YOU. BE SERENE IN LOVE.

Once it was taken and paid, I hurried away to find Doctor Merino.

It was Elias Merino who brought me to Mexico this time. As with so many incidents that antedate the silence, the memory of his call that Sunday morning is clear. I had gone for the weekend to Kathleen's place on Russian Hill, leaving her number with the switchboard at my apartment house. They put Elias through at the atrocious hour of six forty-five. (He afterward confessed having forgotten the time spread.)

"Joel, I need you" he said. "We have what seems an extraordinarily important new find in Chiapas. A remarkable sculpture, six pottery pieces and two kilos of shards. Design analysis suggests a period unclassified to date, possibly the earliest ever. Only you can help us pin it down."

So I got my equipment together and took a Monday midday rocket flight to Mexico City. There we went together to the National Museum of Anthropology where Eli showed me what they had.

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It was absolutely stunning. The sculpture, seventy centimeters high, was a three-part work fashioned of an unfamiliar stone. Represented were a single seated figure, a couple standing, and a singular boyish face surrounded by graceful spikes. It was perfectly preserved.

Although the full-moon countenances were unmistakably Mayan, the piece did not at all resemble what we had come to call the typical style originating in any known epoch of that culture. (If I do not here give a more detailed description of that splendid work, it is because I had then no comprehension of its symbolism.)

Even the pottery jars and the shards were of materials and design structures with which we were unacquainted.

"What's the radiocarbon reading?" I asked.

"That's what we want you to double-check" Eli said. "The reading gives us an age of from four thousand eight to five two. It's hard to accept, when the earliest Mayan we know dates from almost two thousand later."

The museum people at once made available the titanium-shielded room that had been constructed when my high-energy nucleonic equipment was acknowledged as archaeology's most accurate measuring tool.

We got into our cobalt-impregnated suits and put the sculpture in the suspended silver mesh. From three meters I bombarded it with subatomic particles for ninety seconds. Then I placed the *Oie-Pet* counter against the mesh.

Its high-pitched hum was audible for close to half a minute. When that stopped I took a step back so Eli could read the dial with me.

"*Madre de Dios!*" he murmured. "So it's true!"

The numbers on the instrument established beyond question that this strangely lovely figure had been sculpted precisely five thousand one hundred and twelve years ago.

Now Elias Merino and I sat facing each other in the minuscule *sala* of the bungalow that museum authorities had turned over to him. In front of us the TV panel carried a bilingual message: THE REGENT WILL GIVE A SECOND REPORT ON THE CURRENT EMERGENCY AT 1430 HOURS. PLEASE STAND BY.

That had been on when I arrived some ten minutes earlier. There was still a quarter-hour to go. Meanwhile, the two of us, each with notepad and styleo, were exchanging views. I had found Eli admirably adjusted to the phenomenon, ready to await a verdict.

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Transcribed as conversation, starting with my first question after we sat down (I had had to walk in and tap Eli on the shoulder when from the window I couldn't draw his attention), our back-and-forth went so:

"Any theories about this?"

"Conjectures only. Suspect a man-made cause, but if not, this might be the beginning of the end of Earth's life cycle."

"What sort of man-made cause?"

"No idea, really. We've been probing and exploring and tampering with so many natural forces over the last couple of centuries that a dislocation of balance among them would hardly be surprising."

"'Dislocation of balance' sounds pretty final, doesn't it?"

"Not necessarily. If sound has been interrupted by us, we should be able to find out where and how and fix it, sooner or later. Incidentally, Regent Gonzalez's description of what interferes with sound transmission was accurate enough, as far as it went."

"And if it turns out to be a spontaneous thing?"

"Heigh-ho! We'll learn to live with it, as long as there's any living left. At least those of us who still have learning capacity will. Of course the suicide rate will take a big jump."

I was writing *How is it going to affect our research* ... when the television panel got an image. This time the Regent was flanked by two men I recognized as his chief of staff and the science coordinator. His expression had eased notably since the earlier transmission. It was now, if not exactly confident, at least calmed.

The words began to move beneath the three faces:

TO EVERYONE PRESENT: I AM NOW ABLE TO OFFER AN AUTHORITATIVE EXPLANATION OF THE UNPRECEDENTED CONDITIONS WE ARE EXPERIENCING. THROUGH EXTRAORDINARILY EFFECTIVE TEAMWORK AMONG PHYSICISTS, ASTRONOMERS, NUCLEAR EXPERTS AND MATHEMATICIANS OF FIVE ZONES INCLUDING OUR OWN, IT HAS BEEN POSSIBLE TO PINPOINT INDISPUTABLY THE ORIGIN OF OUR COMMON PROBLEM. A COMMUNICATIONS SATELLITE LAUNCHED APRIL 16 BY THE REGENCY OF CHINA, DESIGNATED CH-169, HAS ENTERED UPON A PHASE OF 'ABERRANT FUNCTION,' AS IT IS OFFICIALLY DESCRIBED. THIS INVOLVES THE INTERRUPTION AND NULLIFICATION BY THE SATELLITE OF ALL SOUND WAVES WITH-

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IN THE SCOPE OF ITS APOGEE, WHICH IS 418 KILOMETERS ABOVE THE MEAN TERRESTRIAL SURFACE.

Behind the Regent two workmen were raising a screen on which had been sketched a rudimentary design showing Earth and the approximate orbital paths of all major space materials currently out there. I saw at once that neither the fifty-man Wernher von Braun station nor the Eureka observatory complex had any chance of making contact with CH-169. The Chinese satellite was a bright orange dot depicted over the Indian Ocean.

Eli and I had time for only a mutually inquiring glance; the man's words were running on:

ATTEMPTS BY CONTROL PERSONNEL AT HANKOW AND AT ELEVEN MONITORING STATIONS AROUND THE GLOBE TO REPROGRAM OR DESTRUCT THE SATELLITE HAVE SO FAR BEEN UNSUCCESSFUL. EFFORTS ARE NOW BEING CONCENTRATED ON STUDYING THE FEASIBILITY OF MOUNTING A MULTIPLE NUCLEAR WARHEAD ON A PLUTO IX COMPUTERIZED ROCKET, WITH THE OBJECT OF SHOOTING DOWN CH-169 AT OR ABOUT ITS PERIGEE OF 216 KILOMETERS, AS SHOWN ON THE MAP BEHIND ME. THERE IS PERMANENT CONSULTATION AMONG AUTHORITIES OF ALL REGENCIES, COUNSELED BY THEIR PRINCIPAL SCIENTIFIC ADVISORS, TO DETERMINE THE MOST PRACTICABLE AND PRODUCTIVE COURSE OF ACTION TO BE UNDERTAKEN.

Eli had scribbled something on his notepad; he tore off the sheet and passed it to me. I read: *Esto va para largo, cuate* — which comes out as: *This is going to take a good long time, pal.*

. . .FOR THOSE TO WHOM SOME OF THE TERMS ABOVE MAY PROVE CONFUSING LET ME TRY TO DESCRIBE WHAT IS HAPPENING IN SIMPLER WORDS. NOW, THIS CHINESE SATELLITE . . . .

We could ignore the basic breakdown. I wrote: *If you think there's a lot of time involved, let's take the group and go to the site. There's plenty we can accomplish without sound.*

He scanned it and nodded. *I can get them together by this evening, I think,* he replied. *We'll plan on leaving in the morning.*

We exchanged a couple more notes, sorting out aspects of the project which could be worked on in these conditions. By then the Regent had finished his simplified rundown, and the light band was bringing us the world news.

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BANGKOK: FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 114 YEARS ALL FIGHTING HAS CEASED THROUGHOUT INDOCHINA, AS CONFIRMED BY REPORTS RECEIVED FROM SAIGON, HANOI, VIENTIANE AND PHNOM PENH. UNABLE TO DIRECT MILITARY OPERATIONS, GENERAL STAFFS IN THE FIELD HAVE, FOR THE MOST PART, SIMPLY DISBANDED, ACCORDING TO THESE REPORTS. IT IS ESTIMATED THAT A TOTAL OF 1,760,000 SOLDIERS HAVE THROWN DOWN THEIR ARMS AND DISPERSED.

JOHANNESBURG: EFFORTS BY SOUTH AFRICAN SURROGATE PIETR VAN DEN GROET TO ENFORCE APARTHEID HAVE APPARENTLY FAILED; AS POLICE AND GUARDSMEN REFUSED TO OBEY ORDERS TO SHOOT FRIGHTENED BLACKS AND COLOREDS POURING INTO PROSCRIBED AREAS OF THIS CAPITAL. "WHITE RESIDENTS GENERALLY ARE RECEIVING THE 'INVADERS' WITH OPEN ARMS, OFFERING THEM FOOD, SHELTER AND REASSURANCE" REPORTS AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE CORRESPONDENT ALPHONSE COQUIN.

WASHINGTON: AN EMERGENCY CONSULTATION AMONG MEMBERS OF THE GOVERNING BOARD OF THE INTERNATIONAL AIR AND SPACE TRANSPORT AUTHORITY HAS RESULTED IN AN AGREEMENT TO GROUND ALL CRAFT NOT EQUIPPED FOR AUTOMATIC LASER-BEAM GUIDANCE, FOR THE DURATION OF THE PRESENT CRISIS. IN PRACTICE THIS WILL PERMIT ONLY PROTON VESSELS TO CONTINUE FLIGHT, WITH THE EXCEPTION OF 22 SOLAR-POWERED EXPERIMENTAL VEHICLES OPERATED BY ZONAL AUTHORITIES IN IONOSPHERE CORRIDORS AND CONTROLLED FROM ASTEROID STATIONS.

PARIS: SUBREGENT JULES BRAISSON TODAY ASSURED HIS COUNTRYMEN THAT THE EMERGENCY WILL NOT INTERFERE WITH NORMAL WINE PRODUCTION. HIS ANNOUNCEMENT AVERTED INCIPIENT RIOTS IN 17 FRENCH CITIES.

LONDON: INTERVIEWED VIA TELEPROMPTER CARDS ON BBC TELEVISION, SIR GEOFFREY WILDENHAM-SPATT, DIRECTOR OF THAT FACILITY'S RADIO NETWORK, WAS ASKED WHAT IMMEDIATE PLANS HIS PARTICULAR

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ORGANIZATION HAD. "NOT A RUDDY ONE" SIR GEOFFREY REPLIED. "IF OUR LUCK HOLDS, I SHALL GO FISHING TOMORROW."

At nine o'clock, when the reports (the Regent had given two more) continued negative with no time span predicted for any change, Eli and I walked the four blocks to the plaza. The crowd spilling out from the communications center had by then tripled, at least. Before we reached the middle of the square, I saw why. The notice on the doorjamb was gone. That meant I would have to take my turn with that great mob. It drained off pretty much all the sense of solid orientation I had regained during the hours with Eli.

Kathleen was no hysterical idiot, but she was a sensitive wench, alone and vulnerable in such a situation. I had to get her down here, and I thought I knew how I could, if only I were able to put through a telemessage.

I touched Eli's arm and he paused. I took out my stylo and notepad to let him see why I had wanted to stop. As I began to write, the tail of my eye caught a sudden movement from above. I ducked just in time for the little fruit bat to miss my head and slam into Eli's shoulder.

No one was hurt — including the animal which recovered balance halfway to the ground and flew off in an erratic zigzag — but it prompted us to get out from under the trees.

What I wrote over on the sidewalk was: *I have a cousin in State. If I can get through to him, I'm pretty sure he'll be able to arrange for a proton vessel to bring Kathleen down. But this looks like a longie. So let me hang it and you go ahead and round up our people.*

His answer was inscribed in an impatient scrabble:

Mierda! You don't need to wait. The supervisor and I are friends. We'll go see him and get you a communications priority.

The supervisor's private secretary's secretary clearly didn't know Eli, but she took the brief written message inside. Almost at once the super's p.s. came out, effusive in his gestured greetings to both of us. He hadn't had time to write the response which he did now.

Don Pablo (the supervisor) *has gone to Tuxtla Gutierrez for a meeting with the regional surrogate, but I will do whatever I can. At your service.*

When Eli had jotted a brief explanation, the p.s. at once beckoned us across the *antesala* and into the supervisor's private office. Against the far wall beside the desk stood a teleprinter.

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It is connected to the Superintendency of Communications and they have a direct line to Washington, the p.s. wrote. *Let me request that they accept your message and retransmit it.*

The human psyche in its more or less normal state is a wondrously adaptable device. I had already grown almost accustomed to hearing no voice, no footsteps, no bell, motor or horn. It was still too soon for getting used to the absence of music; to that I doubted I could ever become fully resigned.

But the odd thing was that it came as a mild shock to watch the fingering of the teleprinter keyboard, see the words gliding across the paper without the familiar whir.

The p.s. wasn't just showing off. He put an XVX on his query, which rated priority treatment. That it got. In less than three minutes they came back with an affirmative. Meanwhile, I had penned the message to Deputy Assistant Administrator of State Paul Parsons. It ran to a couple of hundred words. So, while the p.s. settled down to put it through, we switched on the TV panel at the far side.

It was somewhere in the middle of an ancient Hollywood musical, the sort of material that had been dug out of museum vaults and was now being run interminably because these vapid, crapulous films of the past century came complete with Spanish subtitles.

But the panel had been alight less than half a minute when they broke into the grainy picture with a bulletin:

FRANCFORT-AM-MAIN: DR. JOACHIM STROESSNER, DIRECTOR OF THE HAGENSTADT ASTROHPYSICS INSTITUTE HERE, REPORTED TODAY THAT HIS FACILITY'S ULTRAVELOCITY CELESTIAL SCANNER HAD RECORDED A FIX ON FIVE UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS AT 0624, TRACKING THEM FOR 11 SECONDS. THE INSTRUMENT'S LASER-BEAM CALCULATOR SHOWED THE PASSAGE AT AN ALTITUDE OF 48.539 KILOMETERS, FLYING SSW AT A SPEED OF 12,246 KPH. AUTOMATIC STOP-ACTION TELESCOPIC LENSES IMPRINTED THREE IMAGES OF THE OBJECTS, WHICH HAVE BEEN EXAMINED BY A TEAM OF SPECIALISTS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF LEIPZIG'S ALL-EUROPE SCHOOL OF SPACE STUDIES. THEY ARE IN AGREEMENT THAT THESE VEHICLES MUST TENTATIVELY BE IDENTIFIED AS EXTRATERRESTRIAL: HOWEVER THEIR PRECISE ORIGIN CAN BE DETERMINED ONLY

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AFTER THEY HAVE ENTERED THE THERMOSPHERE AND READINGS CAN BE TAKEN ON ENERGY ANALYZERS. STAND BY FOR REPORTS ON DEVELOPMENTS.

I thought this would draw them in, Eli's note read. *They've been monitoring us auditively for centuries, I'm certain, but the incessant sound of gunfire kept them out. Now they've come to see what's happened. Could be humanity's great leap forward — if we don't annihilate the poor bastards before they get a chance to communicate.*

Again the moronic marionettes tap-dancing on the wing of an antediluvian aircraft were mercifully blotted out as the news continued:

SYDNEY: THE FIVE UFO SIGHTED BY FRANCFORT AT 2142 EMT PASSED ABOVE THIS CITY AT 701 AMT; ALTITUDE 112 KMS., SPEED 4,135 KPH. ENERGY ANALYZER READINGS TAKEN AT RABAUL ARE NOW BEING STUDIED TO DETERMINE ORIGIN OF THE CRAFT, WHICH APPEAR TO BE PREPARING FOR TERRAIN CONTACT, POSSIBLY AT ONE OF THE ANTARCTIC SPACEPORTS. A FLOTILLA OF ROCKET PATROLS FROM THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE DEFENSE COMMAND, ATTEMPTING RECONNAISSANCE, WAS UNABLE TO CLOSE IN ON THE UFO DURING THE FIRST QUARTER-HOUR AFTER LAUNCH BUT IS NOW NARROWING THE DISTANCE AS THE LATTER DECREASE VELOCITY. MEANWHILE A POLL TAKEN BY UNIVERSAL NEWS OF 347 SUPERSTAR SCIENTISTS IN ALL SEVEN ZONES REVEALS THAT 61.7 PERCENT BELIEVE THERE IS SOME RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INTERRUPTION OF SOUND WAVES AND THE PRESENCE OF THE UNIDENTIFIED OBJECTS, ALTHOUGH OPINIONS VARY WIDELY AS TO THE NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP. ONLY 17.9 PERCENT OF THOSE QUERIED FIND NO CONNECTION BETWEEN THE TWO PHENOMENA; ANOTHER 18.4 PERCENT DECLINED TO ANSWER THE INQUIRY, AND SEVEN S.S. IGNORED IT. AMONG THOSE WHO REFUSED TO EXPRESS AN OPINION WAS DR. MING PAU-FO, THE EMINENT ASTROPHYSICIST WHO RECENTLY RETURNED FROM VENUS. "I AM ENJOYING THE FIRST PEACE AND QUIET SINCE I GOT BACK," DR. MING WROTE. "NO DOUBT THAT WILL BE 'REMEDIED' ALL TOO SOON; KINDLY ALLOW ME TO

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MEDITATE UNINTERRUPTEDLY WHILE I MAY."

Eli gave me a thin grin with a thumb-and-finger circle. I nodded agreement. Then I caught sight of the supervisor's private secretary signaling me and saw that the teleprinter was activated.

I went over to read: JOEL — WITH AUTHORIZATION AT TOP LEVEL HAVE MESSAGED KATHLEEN THAT PV-19 WILL DEPART WASHINGTON 2215, ARRIVING PRESIDIO SPACEPORT FRISCO 2233. SOUTHBOUND FLIGHT AT HER CONVENIENCE; FRISCOTUXTLA 26 MINUTES. ASSUME YOU CAN MEET HER THERE. BY THE WAY, DON'T YOU MISS THE GRAND UPROAR? BEST EVER, PAUL.

Just as it ended, Eli beckoned me so urgently that I strode back to that side without so much as a gesture of acknowledgment to the p.s. On the TV panel FLASH was being repeated constantly. Then it came: FIVE UFO NOW IDENTIFIED AS ORIGINATING TANIA MADE TERRAIN CONTACT 7.2 KILOMETERS SE HOBART TASMANIA 2209. AFTER GROUPING, VEHICLES EMITTED NUCLEONIC SHIELD PREVENTING ACCESS OR APPROACH FROM ALL POINTS AT APPROXIMATELY 800 METERS. ROCKET PATROLS DOWN AT HOBART SPACEPORT AWAITING INSTRUCTIONS.

Mexicans react to crisis as fine-bred women and horses do: with the nervous system exclusively. This means that their responses may run a gamut from detached amusement to eloquent hysteria, depending on the particular stimuli involved.

As we cruised the 54 kilometers to Tuxtla aboard the electrohovercar, I began to see how the nationals, after the first shock had passed, were taking this strangest of all emergencies. Highway patrolmen had been turned out in force. Passing them, one every two kilometers with slimlined flightpacks strapped to their back's the notable identity of expressions commanded my attention.

In its simplest and clearest dimension I was reminded of the faces at an exceptional *corrida,* when the bulls are know to be of the best and the *mano a mano* is between superlative *matadores.* It is a look of alert expectation, of savoring the unforeseeable, of total absorption in a spectacle as varied as the days of early spring.

It is something very close to the look I had seen on the old *campesino* in that maguey field as I walked to town when the stillness was new. Only his had been

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instinctive, born of natural wisdom, and these men were just learning to be wise.

In short, I saw that with the first spasm of bewildered fright eased, the well-tempered people of this ageless land would not fragment or fall into helpless apathy but were finding their stride and pacing themselves to go forward into the fathomless future...

Eli put the car on automatic tracking, and I set the attache case TV panel above the controls. By now we knew that the people who had touched down in Tasmania were indeed people — tall, lean, sharp-featured men with very dark skins but indisputably humaoid in the visual aspect, all 25 of them; no women. Now, suddenly, we were seeing them walk away from their vehicles in a group. As they reached the nucleonic shield, it bulged ahead of them; then a section seemed to break away and form around the men while the breach behind them healed itself.

THERE HAS BEEN NO COMMUNICATION WITH THE VISITORS, the words across the bottom of the picture said. HOWEVER, A QUESTIONNAIRE PREPARED BY AUTHORITIES IN HOBART WILL BE PRESENTED TO THE STRANGERS BY MEMBERS OF THE ROCKET PATROL PLATOONS WHICH ARE NOW ADVANCING TO MAKE CONTACT.

The transmission cut to a camera recording this latter action. There were sixty or more of them riding close together on their jet cycles. Each carried what looked like a tranquilizer gun across his back. Eli had his notepad out and I read as he wrote: *Those damned fools think they're going to knock them out and bring them in trussed up like gorillas. There's still no understanding at all of that shield.*

I nudged him to watch the TV. The platoons were still coming on, but the newsline reported: MEANWHILE, AN INITIAL EFFORT TO SHOOT DOWN CH-169 HAS FAILED. THE ATTEMPT WAS MADE WHILE THE SATELLITE WAS OVER THE GOBI DESERT, BUT OBSERVERS AT STATIONS IN SUIYUAN, KIRIN, MUKDEN AND SHANGHAI CONCUR IN REPORTING AN UNACCOUNTABLE MOVEMENT OF THE ARTIFACT DESCRIBED BY SEVERAL AS 'AN APPARENTLY CONTROLLED EVASIVE ACTION.' CH-169 VEERED ABRUPTLY OFF COURSE AT THE EXACT MOMENT WHEN THE PLUTO IX FIRED ITS HOMING WARHEADS, AND IN SEVEN SECONDS HAD ATTAINED APOGEE WHERE IT HAS RESUMED NORMAL ORBIT. A

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SECOND DESTRUCT ATTEMPT WILL BE UNDERTAKEN AT THE NEXT PERIGEE OVER THE BAY OF BENGAL, EIGHTY-FOUR MINUTES FROM NOW.

Eli leaned back and rubbed his nose with a long index finger. I wondered if he was thinking along the same line as the conjecture that had just occurred to me. Put in writing it was: *Can that maneuver and the presence of the party from Tania be pure coincidence?* He glanced at it and grinned, not very infectiously.

If so, it's the weirdest one in history, he jotted under my question.

The PV was overhead at about a hundred and fifty meters when we pulled up in Tuxtla Gutierrez spaceport, its shuttlewagon just emerging from the stern hatch. Twenty seconds later, that sleek craft touched down on pad number 6. Two persons came off the ramp and into the reception blister, which at once lifted 10 centimeters and started toward us in response to our directional beam.

I was paying attention to only one of those two. Her mahogany red hair (a lot of people think it dyed, but I know better, for the best of reasons) was somewhere between loose-brushed and tousled, as always. It made the right frame for that cameo of a face with the great green eyes like Caribbean waters offshore Cozumel.

They stayed lovingly open for just an instant after we came together, then drifted shut as our kiss deepened with the sensuous languor I prize so dearly.

No one interrupted; when we took a half step apart to get a complementary fill of looking at each other, over her shoulder I saw the man who had come off with her squinting self-consciously at nothing in the distance. Kathleen caught on, squeezed my arm and dug into a slash pocket of her travelsuit. Out came a fat little sheaf of notes; *that's my lady, ever the foresighted one.*

The top one read: *Mon Ciel — This is Brainerd Hough of the Zonal Security Council. When word got around (I almost wrote 'when people heard') about your arranging to bring me down, the Regent sent for Paul and said he wanted Hough to come along. Something to do with using your special equipment in the crisis, I believe.*

Even while I shook hands with him and we went through the grimaced miming that had already become a standard substitute for "How d'you do?" I felt sharp annoyance knifing into the delight of a moment earlier. What the devil had gone wrong with them up there? How did they imagine that

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an instrument designed to wrest from ancient *objets d'art* the secrets of their age could help tame a maverick satellite? Or make friends with men from Tania, that most recently located planet, about which next to nothing was known?

But the habits of urbanity enslave us. I waved Hough toward the hovercar and gave him a dumb-show introduction to Eli, signing that explanations would come later.

As we paused at the exit, Kathleen held up her identity plate to reflect on the register. In the customary four seconds the light in front of us turned green and the gate swung open. Her kit was in the slot of the down-ramp; our magnets dropped squarely and lifted it into the hold.

Then Eli looked over and gave me the eyebrows-up head jerk and the little open-hand wrist swivel that meant "Where to?" (Mexicans have never needed sound to ask or tell each other a great many things.)

Let's go to your place first so I can find out just what this individual wants, I scribbled in Spanish. Beneath that I added a couple of lines telling Eli who Hough was. He frowned, flipped the automatic switch and turned the TV on.

No accent was required to let us know where the image came from. Even before the lenses zoomed in on the familiar rugged features of Lord Cummington, the setting was unmistakable. Three centuries after Chippendale, official Britain is still wedded to him. (Disarmingly, though, the big tapestry on the right wall was a 16th-century Arras.)

The Regent of North Europe looked properly grave, in keeping with the words that scurried across the bottom of the screen:

...DEVELOPMENTS IN VICTORIA FOLLOWING THE OVERWATER FLIGHT ACROSS BASS STRAIT BY THE GROUP IDENTIFIED AS TANIANS, THE REGENT HAS SUMMONED A COUNCIL OF HIS COLLEAGUES AND SURROGATES IN SCOTLAND, WALES, THE IRISH UNION AND THE TWELVE CONTINENTAL SUBREGIONS. ALL BUT ONE OF THOSE WHO WILL ATTEND ARE DUE TO ARRIVE WITHIN MINUTES AT EDWARD X SPACEPORT. M. JULES BRAISSON, THE FRENCH SUBREGENT, HAS INSISTED ON TRAVELING VIA THE CHANNEL TUNNEL RAILWAY, DESPITE ITS RELATIVE OBSOLESCENCE. A SPECIAL TRAIN IS NOW BEING READIED FOR HIS USE, BUT M. BRAISSON CANNOT REACH LONDON BEFORE 1630 HOURS EMT. "GIVEN THE TWO SETS

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OF UNPRECEDENTED CIRCUMSTANCES WE FACE," LORD CUMMINGTON HAS SAID, "WE MAY REGRETTABLY FIND OURSELVES OBLIGED TO TAKE EMERGENCY MEASURES WITHOUT THE VALUED ADVICE AND HOPED-FOR CONSENT OF OUR FRENCH COLLEAGUE."

As the picture faded to a momentary blank, Kathleen slipped me another of her precomposed notes; *What's the real story about these supposed creatures from outer space?*

Before I could start an answer, the television was giving a better one. The camera, obviously from a considerable distance with telescopic focus, showed us the strange group approaching. They were skimming along now, and the cloud of dust beneath their gleaming boots, though indistinct, showed they had perfected some version of the jet footwear our people have been working on for several decades. Now and again, light flashed in jagged curves off the molecules of their shield.

The running commentary informed us that we were just five and a half kilometers southeast of Melbourne; that shortly before, a potential head-on encounter with the cycle patrols had been avoided when the visitors activated their jet boots, rose vertically some seven meters, then bent their knees at a forty-five-degree angle, and flew as a unit at great speed above the platoons and on across northern Tasmania and the Strait to Australia, covering the 346 kilometers in 17 minutes.

Somewhat as if in a shamefaced footnote, the report added that the patrols had fired what were indeed tranquilizer guns at the strangers, only to have their darts disintegrate as they penetrated the shield. The humiliating flavor of this episode grew pungent with the final sentence: THERE WERE NO REPORTS OF RETALIATORY FIRE OR OF WEAPONS VISIBLE ON THE PERSONS OF THE ALLEGED TANIANS.

Eli slammed his hand against the control panel. Somehow the silence of that contact startled me as no other absence of sound had for the past twelve hours or so. He grabbed his stylo and scrawled: *Didn't I tell you we'd try to finish off or make prisoners of these people before they ever had a chance to let us know anything about themselves?* It was rhetorical of course; I answered with a nod. And, suddenly, the picture of the swiftly advancing twenty-five vanished...

When the panel lighted up again, it was almost a quarter-hour after we were back at Eli's. In the

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interim I had had a chance to absorb all Kathleen's melange of news, gossip, insight and reflections — a total twenty-two memos. It was a heady compendium and a comforting one. This woman's marvelous vitality and probing mind had actually got a boost from the phenomenon. She was intent, curious, a bit excited — but not in the least unnerved.

And from her jotted observations I could stitch together a pretty vivid sampler of life north of the border now: erratic, disjointed, with a wicked spreading undercurrent of schizophrenia that might tear the whole society to shreds.

After that, there was time to take a fairly broad reading of the flunky Washington had sent down. (Ever since the World Zonal Unions were established, we have habitually referred to any functionary below the rank of deputy subregent as 'flunky.') I put him at 48 or so and experienced a small twinge speculating whether my hair would have thinned that much in another five years.

He had a noncommittal face on which no one's gaze would ever fix spontaneously. His eyes were that odd pale shade once described by a mordant Hungarian wit as "duck-shit on ice." Only his mouth gave any clue to character, and it was not an engaging one: lips pulled in and down at the corners, as if he had never known anything or anyone he could really approve of — himself included.

Then an exchange of notes gave me a hard look at his mind. It was punctilious, didactic, crammed with facts ... and wholly desolate of ideas. He explained that within an hour of the time the source of the stillness had been defined the Regent issued a decree requiring all "major scientists" to place their services at the disposal of the Regency for consultative and/or investigative purposes. Now Dr. L. Jeremy Nadir, the fusty old curator emeritus of the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History, had come up with the preposterous notion that my subatomic bombarder might somehow be employed in downing CH-169.

I told Hough what I thought of that. I pointed out that the implement was no ray gun, no disintegrator, that in any case it was totally inoperative without the silver mesh, and just how did he propose to get that onto a 24,000-kph satellite orbiting in the magnetosphere?

His reply, stiffly polite, disclaimed competence to evaluate my objections. All he could say was that the Regent and the Security Council, confronted by a crisis of unknown cause and incalculable magnitude, had agreed that any

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experiment, no matter how far-fetched by ordinary measure, was worth trying.

In a somewhat tighter hand (diffidence, if he had been speaking?) Hough added that, quite aside from any of these matters, his instructions had been simply to inform me that my immediate presence in Washington was required under terms of the aforementioned decree.

This should never have been said. I shoved the paper in front of Eli, who held it so Kathleen could see too. They both reached those final lines at the same moment. Eli threw back his head and puffed out a derisive soundless snort; she made a small *moue* as if at a disagreeable odor. Ours is still a wretchedly imperfect society, but it has come a long way from the time when we of the science fraternity could be ordered about and regimented by politicans.

I am here on affairs of my own discipline at the request of Dr. Merino, I wrote — and found that I was stabbing it out in block letters. *I shall remain here until our current research is completed. You may convey this to the Regent as my specific personal response.*

As Hough read it, his tight mouth twitched twice, and he looked as if his bile duct had ceased to function. That was when the TV came back to life. What it showed us was so extraordinary that we were instantly wrenched away from any other consideration.

In what was evidently a Melbourne street — no words had yet appeared, but the tall buildings and the monorail visible overhead clearly indicated an urban center — the extraterrestrial group, sans shield and no longer close-knit but moving as individuals came on toward a stationary camera, smiling, waving, bowing, while dozens of persons capered delightedly in front of them, laughing so wholeheartedly that the ring of it seemed to reverberate in the mind's silent ear.

Behind them swirled a seemingly interminable swarm, their mass topped by gyrating hands and arms, so that the effect was like watching a vast field of hemp in a high wind. An instant more and we could see that these people too were caught up in the sweeping mood of euphoria that had no taint of tension or hysterics about it but only joy and relaxation.

As those faces moved close enough to observe clearly, the men from Tania were at the forefront of the scene, perhaps less than three meters from the lenses.

Abruptly, Eli bent forward studying the picture with such intensity that I hunched to the edge of my seat, seeking to find what had riveted his attention. And then

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I saw it. In the front rank — so to speak, for there was now no such rigid formation — one of the strangers, even a bit taller than the rest, wore about his neck a figurine on a woven chain. Strolling, nodding, beaming at the crowd, he fingered that tiny image constantly with a rhythmic stroking motion that caused it to catch sunlight every few seconds and project itself in vivid bas-relief ....

When I turned from the panel to look at him, Eli was already writing. I knew what he was going to say before I saw it: *Let's get the hell to the site.*

While we skimmed over rough ground in the barren Santa Caterina canyon twenty kilometers northeast of Sordera, we watched as a fascinated camera eye followed the Tanians to, consecutively, Canberra, Sydney, Brisbane. In each city they at once provoked the same astonishing mood of ecstatic effervescence — and everywhere the "leader" walked in the center, fingering his amulet, turning it from side to side ....

The newstape brought us a series of seemingly unrelated bulletins. A second shot at the satellite had been eluded as neatly as the first .... Those conferees in London were wrangling on a lightletter board over whether to send troops or psychiatrists to Australia .... The Regent of Mid-Asia had abdicated and gone into seculsion at his mountain retreat with fourteen maidens selected for him at the most exclusive finishing schools of Tokyo, Kabul, Agra, Katmandu, etc .... Members of the Northern Hemisphere Defense Command patrols sent to Tasmania to intercept the strangers had returned to Hobart, sacked a liquor shop, then ridden off again. Subsequently, their cycles, weapons and clothing were found in a suburban field; residents of the area reported seeing naked men dancing in a nearby eucalyptus grove.

Then came the real blockbuster: FLASH — PEKING REPORTS DISCOVERY OF SATELLITE CH-169 IN REMOTE TIBETAN VALLEY, GROUNDED INTACT 60 HOURS EARLIER, INSTRUMENTS SHOW. WORLD FACILITIES ALERTED, ALL NOW CONCENTRATING ON SEARCH FOR TRUE IDENTITY OF ARTIFACT INTERRUPTING SOUND WAVES.

We had hung a clipboard from the control panel. On it Eli now wrote in letters large enough for everyone aboard to read:

That satellite is safe as long as the Tanians are alive. And we'd better be hoping with all our hearts

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and guts that nothing does happen to them — the survival of this planet depends on it.

He was a bit ahead of me in reading this awesome riddle; yet in broad terms I got his meaning. I glanced around to see how far the others were following. There were eight in all though only five would be able to absorb the English Eli had chosen to use for Kathleen and Hough's benefit.

There had been no way to leave either of them behind, in her case because I wouldn't have it; in his it was simply a matter of not knowing what the hell to do with the man. He wanted urgently to advise Washington of my "uncooperative" response, but as is common with gringo emissaries dispatched on foreign missions, he lacked all knowledge of the local tongue, and we had no time to wet-nurse him at the communications center.

In remarkably short order Eli had rounded up Dr. Mario Alatriste, his master philologist, the excavation supervisor and two diggers. Now I saw Hough studying the words on the clipboard with a mixture of perplexity and skeptical derision. Alatriste looked thoughtful, and Kathleen, head tilted, was watching me speculatively. I gave a small sign to show that I accepted Eli's evaluation.

Then we were there. Two armed guards halted us momentarily fifty meters short of the site but waved the car on as soon as they caught sight of Eli and the others.

The commendably symmetrical digging showed with what professional care the earth had been layered aside until at a depth of 3.32 meters they had found that incomparable allegory in stone.

We all got out and Eli beckoned me to go with him down into the depression. Kathleen stood quietly at the rim, a woman whole enough to accept her natural role.

He showed me the cavity from which the statuette had been taken, asking me with hands and eyes where I thought we should probe now. I paced off an approximate 6.64 meters and pointed. At once he signaled the diggers and their chief to begin.

While they worked under the shadow-free lamps with automatic focus, the rest of us stayed in a cluster about the panel that was bringing to this remote spot on Mexico's southeastern flank the incredible scenes of a world in metamorphosis.

"Conquering" all Australia in the space of seven hours, the Tanians had accomplished an identical feat among the Japanese in little more than half that time and were now in China. (The quotes around "conquering" are

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mine; the newcasters could seem to find no other term for what was happening.)

From a purely technical point of view — and later I had to acknowledge with some chagrin that at the moment this above all had claimed my particular fancy — the strangers' most arresting exploit had been the summoning, without visible equipment, of their vehicles from the pasture below Hobart to Melbourne's spaceport, where these made terrain contact with their nucleonic shield intact.

The instantaneous functioning of world-wide visual communication had, quite naturally, never been so apparent as now when it was all that held the peoples of the globe together. By the same token, no event in the memory of living man had ever highlighted so vividly the mutations in character and psychic reflex that persist among those peoples despite more than half a century of political one-worldness.

Kathleen had a hand firmly entwined in mine while we watched the statesmen of North Europe react with dismay and confusion as they were informed that they no longer enjoyed the options they sought to exercise — that their armed forces were dissolving massively; then brief footage from Nairobi brought us a charming scene of Kenyan tribesmen in traditional dress dancing in the parks; that cut to a shot of downtown La Paz where *poncho*-clad Indians, patently full of *chicha,* were improvising a carnival complete with acrobats, flame eaters and a phalanx of happily disorganized tumblers. Clients in a Dublin pub were shown amid blue clouds of clay-pipe smoke watching themselves watch themselves watching themselves on TV, down to thumbnail size in a sequence that left us all somewhat uncertain as to its significance.

From Marseilles came word that the 81-year-old great-grandson of Charles de Gaulle had volunteered to place himself in the nose cone of the next missile directed at the errant satellite if provided with a dozen "hand grenades." Military historians were being consulted to ascertain the nature of the item specified.

And so it went — almost endless variations on a theme; and that theme contradicting the bloody bulk of human history was non-violence. If Nordic people seemed less readily affected than most others by the tranquillity that was spreading globally like the flu epidemics of old, at least they were slaughtering and maiming each other in a dramatically reduced rhythm. Universal News' daily roundup at 11 a.m. EMT listed only 173 "non-natural" deaths

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during the preceding twenty-four hours in the North Europe zone. Of these, all but five had been accidental or suicides; the five homicides were committed by a Hamburg pimp gone berserk.

Three flashes from the red lamp below apprised us of a find. Eli was first down, but I nosed out Alatriste. That turned out to be the wrong order. What the excavations chief was carefully dusting off with his llama's-hair brush was an oval stone tablet seventy centimeters high by forty-five at its greatest width. Around the curved top ran a design which when cleaned sufficiently for recognition had Eli and me exchanging grins of significant delight.

The delicately chiseled work reproduced the triple theme of the statuette we had examined in the museum at Mexico City. There were the single seated figure with face uplifted — the same that appeared in miniature on the Tanian's amulet — the standing couple, eye to eye, palms touching, and the strange little thicket or wheat sheaf surrounding a highly stylized man-child's face.

But here the pictorial symbolism was only by way of decoration, presumably, for the remainder of the tablet was covered with close hieroglyphic writing. One set of characters appeared beneath each segment of the design; then the text ran continuously, forming a compact mass of material some fifty lines long.

We stepped aside at once to make way for the philologist. He studied the tablet for perhaps two minutes before taking out his notepad.

This is very similar in root structure to writings found at Copan and Palenque, but has a much more sophisticated vocabulary, he wrote. *I believe I can transcribe it but I wouldn't want to commit myself to a timetable.*

Four hours and twenty minutes later, Doctor Alatriste looked up from his easel and beckoned. In that time we had watched the unbelievable Tanians complete their "spiritiual infiltration" (someone had at last come up with a substitute for "conquest") of all Asia including Siberia and move on to European Russia, where the three-man Regency had issued a pronouncement declaring the strangers' attitude and intentions as manifest so far "not incompatible with Social-Technocrat ideology."

When Kathleen, Eli and I were gathered about him, the philologist pointed to the hieroglyphs below the figures at the top, then wrote three words: SERENITY — HARMONY — PEACE.

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These concepts appear to be the essence of the entire message, he added. *Up to now I have made only a tentative deciphering of about one-third of the text, but it seems to be entirely concerned with that thesis. I will keep you posted.*

We were all, of course, on those excellent Indonesian energy capsules that eliminate the need for sleep and provide balanced sustenance over a forty-eight-hour period. By the time the Tanians reached Rome (everyone among us was now aware that their tactic involved well-spaced stops, with the influence generated at each radiating out over a contiguous area of several hundred kilometers), the eastern sky was graying.

Suddenly a small stone bounced off my boot. I glanced around to see Doctor Alatriste signaling imperiously. We joined him. He had what amounted to a rough draft of the entire tablet writing.

The words that were there, as we assimilated them bit by bit, told us why and how the world had changed, perhaps forever, and who was responsible.

That text read as follows:

The present speaking is the testament of the Brotherhood of the Learned of Tzitzol. Having achieved supreme dominion of the three phases of advance (progress) toward human perfection: Serenity, in the person — Harmony, of one with another — Peace, among all men, we find that our people are not yet prepared to comprehend and apply these precepts. Therefore, as our Brotherhood also possesses the secret of transmigration of the mind, soul and body, we shall now abandon not only our cultural centers but this turbulent planet as well, to await the time when men are ready to receive and accept the liberating knowledge of Serenity — Harmony — Peace. Then we shall return, as teachers and mentors, but only when the noise of man's conflict with man has been stilled. Let the Image of the Three Attainments be revealed again, and that will mark the hour of our homecoming.

The rest of us, immobile, were still trying to absorb the vast implications of it when Brainerd Hough stirred impatiently and scribbled in his pocket pad: *This is patent fraud. We are all being taken in by sinister subversives. I demand to be returned to where I can book passage at once for Washington since my presence there will now be urgently required.*

The note, thrust in front of Eli, was taken by him from Hough's shaking fingers, crumpled slowly into a small ball and tossed deep within the excavation.

From the look of him, Hough

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responded with a snort of outrage which happily went unheard. After that, he turned on his heel and stalked off into the gathering dawn. I don't recall having learned what became of him after that — or making any effort whatever to find out.

The Tanians — now known to us as descendants of those magnificent Mayans who left Earth more than fifteen hundred years before the earliest era of their existence previously identified — have "conquered" us all. Violence is disappearing from the world. There are no more armies. The seven Regencies have agreed on a program of destruction of all weapons through fission-fusion, in uninhabited outer space.

It is, of course, much too soon to foresee how long we must wait until the S-H-P Principle, as it has become designated universally, can be assimilated by everyone. Despite the swift response among peoples of gentler tradition, Eli doubts that the present generation in areas where aggression has historically keynoted the way of life — Germany, Britain, the United States — will be able to adjust, even under the magical influence of the Tanian-Mayans' presence (they are tireless in moving from region to region, having acquired the art of instant sleep in flight).

Eli may be right. Certainly it is going to take us a considerable while just to understand all the technological wonders the newcomers have begun to explain and demonstrate. (They have fluent command of every major language spoken on our planet, as well as of Unilangue, that awkward tongue which bureaucrats of all zonal administrations are required to learn and almost no one else will study.)

With fifty centuries of uninterrupted peace to think and plan and evolve in, starting from a level of spiritual maturity far beyond any known on Earth today, this extraordinary race has achieved a plane of development that we can only dimly perceive in most aspects.

One facet of it, though, I grasp very well and applaud without reserve. These geniuses have consigned the reproductive process to the laboratory where geneticists supervise it from start to finish. All impregnation materials, both male and female, are not only synthetic but uniformly perfected. There are no deformed or mentally retarded offspring among them, no miscarriages or still-births; every child is born healthy, intelligent — and sterile.

Finally freed from the enslavement of gestation, labor and motherhood, their women have

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entered fully upon their intended function of being partners in the experience of total pleasure, each deriving her contentment from that which she gives to her chosen mate or mates.

Sex, in a word, has with them assumed its rational place. Still, I can't help wondering if they haven't perhaps overlooked one valuable item. The silence they have imposed on us earthlings is, I discover, an incomparable boon to love-making.

I found that out the first night after the plaque was dug up, when Kathleen and I went to bed together back at Raul Galvan's small hotel. She may have been no more ardent than ever; yet the absence of such distractions as cries, whimpers and gasps let me savor as never before the aesthetic delight of that lovely body in an infinite variety of voluptuous writhings.

Indeed, I must confess to being just generally fonder of that bright, unfailingly articulate dear girl, now that I don't have to listen to her.

The Tanian-Mayans say they can give us back sound selectively, wave by wave and area by area, as seems appropriate.

That's terribly clever, of course — only I'm not all that sure I want it any more.

COMING NEXT MONTH

Next month's feature story is the first part of a novel by one of sf's masters, Frederik Pohl. Its title is MAN PLUS. It concerns a world on the brink of nuclear holocaust, with the cities of the United States in a semi-permanent state of armed riot. The President of the United States has studied the projections and has ordered the creation of a Cyborg astronaut to become the first Martian, and the story focuses on this astronaut, a human being who becomes something quite different.

You will not want to miss this extraordinary story. The April issue is on sale March 2; or, use the coupon on page 58.

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"Lamont Cranston? No, there's no Lamont Cranston here."

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For consistently strong, well-plotted sf, Charles Runyon is hard to top; witness this story about a tough old space hand and his trip into a young girl's memory.

Brain Diver

by CHARLES W. RUNYON

I have ego identity. I know that I am.

But who am I?

Slowly the ego grows flesh, like pearl-stuff on a grain of sand. Nerves sprout from the soil of the ego concept. Heart, lungs, kidneys, liver ... blood vessels flare in a net of red. My chest is thick, my belly long and flat, my arms and legs lithe and strong. I pulse with energy.

I am a man-child. Nine, ten years old. Inside a ...

Large room. I see a vaulted ceiling with portholed lenses condensing the rays of a pale red sun. Baby-pink light drifts down like layers of cotton candy.

I know that outside lies the world of Scrag: snow, ice and cold which burns the flesh and turns steel into brittle glass. I know more than a ten-year-old boy should know — about the lighting principle of the dome, about other worlds. I have seen stars grow into suns, planets coalesce into seas and continents.

I hear music, a swirl of pipes and the keening of a flute. The children are dancing: twenty girls, nine boys and one adult female. A teacher, or chaperon. I can sense her thoughts: boredom, anticipation of food, leg-weariness and tingles of sex pleasure behind the knees. Many girls dance together, beacuse of the shortage of boys. The boys dance reluctantly, feeling their awkwardness. I am aware of them, but they are not aware of me.

Ah...now I see why. I sit against the curved wall of the dome, behind a rubbery-leafed vine which grows from a pot of purple soil. One of the girls is aware of me.

A lovely girl ... I think. Slate-colored hair whirls about her head like dark taffy stirred by a spoon, then spirals loosely down her back. Her skin is white, but

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shadowed by a dark undercoating. A blue skirt bells out from her waist and doesn't quite cover her buttocks. The rest of her is sheathed in a leotard so sheer that I see its blueness only in the inner curve of her elbows and knees. The slim torso is unadorned by breasts, but her almond eyes glitter with female hunger. I feel an age-link with her which has no relation to the immaturity of our bodies.

Her lips pout in my direction. She frowns, and I feel it in my body —

No! More than that. She saw me, and I took form.

I look down. I wear a dun-colored leotard and a sequined girdle which passes between my legs like a breechcloth. I walk toward her, and movement is like liquid flowing. I am wax being poured into a mold. I want to run and jump; my awkwardness is nothing compared to the energy surging through me. My senses are needle-sharp; the mingled cachet of thirty young bodies flows around me, tainted by the odor of machine oil and plastic.

She sees me coming and draws away from her partner. He frowns at me and walks away. I am no surprise to him, despite the smallness of the group. I must be known here.

She raises her arms, and I fit myself to her. Her hair against my cheek has a dry slickness. She radiates a smell of warm milk and honey. Two turns around the floor, and I sense her thought: *He dances so smoothly. Maybe he knows the Appela.*

The word strikes my brain, and the knowledge of the intricate dance flows into my muscles. I do the steps, and a light glows behind her eyes.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

She laughed. "You know."

Leeba. I pulled it out of her mind, together with all she'd ever done and been, a tangled knot of memories that burst inside my skull: Leeba Knight-Namburi. Eight years of love, peace, happiness, each day a jewel strung on the thread of her life.

"Leeba," I said. "What's my name?"

Her off-white cheeks dimpled. "Everybody knows their own name."

Bork. I don't know where it came from, but it sounded correct — except that Bork had issued from a night club strip-singer, fathered by a one-eyed spacer on the Sol-Arcturus run. Bork didn't belong with aristocrats; he had a box under the Space City dome, where he lived on scraps from restaurant kitchens. He led spacemen to drink and to women and then plundered their pockets of

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what remained, but —

Here I was, a man in a boy's body, nursing a grown-up purpose quite apart from the dance. Why was I here? I searched my mind but couldn't find the answer.

Leeba meanwhile behaved like a woman. Her satin cheek pressed mine; her warm breath tickled my throat. The hard angularity of her little-girl body pressed me in strange, adult ways. My body ached to merge with hers. I loved her as a man loves a woman. For an instant the straight cylinder of her chest became a dual softness pillowed against me. Her long waist became shorter, its narrowness accented by the swell of her hips. Her slim legs acquired a curvature of thigh and calf, a smoothness of flesh sheathing knee and ankle. Her eyes hooked into mine, and I felt the hunger of her womb.

Surprise exploded in my brain: *She knows who I am! She's hiding too —!*

The trigger tripped, and my purpose burst like a nova inside my head:

KILL! KILL! KILL! KILL KILL KILLKILLKILLKILLKILL

The impulse searched my brain. I felt an urge to vomit on the pearly plastic floor. I set my teeth and reached into the pouch at my belt.

I drew out a six-inch needle tipped with the purple stain of *glacwin* venom, extracted during summer from a small flying reptile which secreted the poison in two glands beside its beak. *Glacwin* would give her an instant of agony, then death.

The music stopped. She turned her back to me and looked around the room, almost as though she were offering the chance I needed. But something else came first.

She has to know.

"Leeba," I said. "You can't stay here."

She turned her eyes on me, and my mind fizzed in chaos:

Aware Leeba, you

Leeba ¿I ma whom tuB

KILL!

KILL! tnac yats ereh

Fragments of thought fluttered like torn confetti. Her eyes were the only reality; they reflected a slender blue-eyed boy in dun leotards. It was the only identity around, and so I grabbed it.

"You're talented," I said.

"You mean the dance?"

"I mean that ... jangly stuff, broken mirrors flying around."

She wrinkled her brows. "Broken mirrors?"

I had to try again. "You can't stay here, Leeba."

She frowned. "You mean...on the dance floor?"

"Not the dance. Scrag. At this time. It isn't yours."

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The air rippled, bent and nearly shattered — but not quite.

"Are you sure you know what you're talking about?" she asked.

Was I? Why was I here, knowing nothing of myself but a sordid scrap of a vagrant's life? And my attempt to kill her was hateful to my mind. *I am not my own man. Whose am I?*

"Yours, Leeba?"

"You can dance with me again if you like."

That's it, Leeba. Under the music, do the deed. It's for her own good ... isn't it? I took her in my arms, holding the needle between my fingers with its point outward. I could feel her heart pulsing against her ribs. I held her tight and swung her around, rehearsing the movement which would end her life. The quick reversal of the needle, the plunge....

But she had to know. *Had to.*

"Ready, Leeba?"

"...Ready?"

"To come back with me. It won't hurt."

Her eyes knew, but her little-girl face puckered in puzzlement. "Why must I come back with you?"

I grated my teeth and tried to remember. "Kley? Does that sound like a reason?"

"A kind of dirt? How could that be a reason?"

"Not dirt. A man — I think. Don't you know?"

She shook her head. "I don't know anyone named Clay."

Could I be Kley? No, Kley was ... someone else. I was Bork, and I had to ... had to ....

Her eyes hooked out my thought.

"You don't have to," she said. "Stay here with me. It's the best time."

I sent energy pulsing down my arm. My wrist moved, the needle turned. I braced my mind for the shuddering convulsion of her death; then I was lying on a bed, amid hospital smells. Oh, Leeba, you were right, it was the best time, those years on Scrag. Lovely youthworld, now it's gone, and I lie on a white sheet —

"— Lousy goddamn trick!"

"Now, Bork!"

"Watch him, Doc!"

"Look out, he's gonna smash —!"

I felt the bite of a needle, then my muscles turned to oatmeal. When I woke up they had me wrapped up in a canvas kimono. I couldn't move, and so I lay there cataloguing my surroundings:

Steelite cot, white walls about the size of a third officer's cabin. A man in a doctor's suit sat at the table marking charts; against the wall was a metal cabinet equipped with dials. Beside it rested a dome-shaped helmet from which

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protruded a heavy, coated cable.

"Doc," I grunted. "You the doc?"

He got up and came over, smoothing his mustache with his forefinger. "I'm a psychiatrist, yes. Bruce Pepke."

His voice sounded like he was speaking through a long hollow tube. He bent over the straps, his face set in that bland medical mask which says there's nothing at all to worry about. That made me nervous — but he sprung me from the strait jacket and gave me a cigarette, which as far as I knew qualified him as the best friend I had in the world.

"Well, Bork, can you tell me what happened?"

"I was back on Scrag —" I stopped. "Or was that a dream?"

"Did it seem like a dream?"

"It seemed real," I said. "Realer than this, anyway."

He nodded. "That's the effect of the memorigraf."

"What's a memorigraf? Maybe that's a dream too."

"The memorigraf — you don't remember that?"

"I'm cleaned out, Doc."

"Hmmm. She's got a stronger mind than I thought." He crossed his legs and eased the crease of his white pants. "Suppose you tell me what happened, and let me evaluate it. Wait, I'll get Kley."

He came back with a tall thin aristocrat whose thin face looked coarsened from sleep. He stood stiff and remote beside my cot, his thumb hooked in his gold-embroidered sash. His fingers beat a nervous tattoo as he spoke:

"Pepke says you contacted Leeba. How was she?"

"She was..." I frowned at him. "Who the hell are you?"

He stiffened abruptly and looked at the doc, who spoke in that confidential way people have around invalids, as if they're weak-minded and can't understand long words:

"He's got a touch of amnesia, Lord Kley."

"Kley?" I said. "I mentioned you to her. Why?"

"I'm her husband."

I stared up at his pointed, aristocratic chin. His white hair, which I'd at first taken as a sign of age, was a natural color. He had the pale almost milky-blue eyes of a Centauran colonial. His well-kept skin could have belonged to a man anywhere from fifty to thirty.

"You like 'em young, don't you?" I said.

"Young?" He jerked back his head and blinked. "I don't —"

"With your permission, milord." The doc leaned forward. "You're Bork Craighen, field personnel supervisor for Galactic Minerals. Here's your ID card. Remember?"

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I squinted at the plastic rectangle, embossed with the curlicued crest of GM. It looked familiar, so did the battered face in the photo. The psych wiped off a little mirror and held it in front of my face. I saw a broad tough face with a lumped nose, knife scar splitting my right cheek, cropped blue-black hair stippled with grey....

"Okay," I said. "That's the face I'm wearing now. But a couple of hours ago, or how the hell ever you measure time in this featherwig factory, I was a blue-eyed blond kid in a ballroom. A real silver-spoon specimen in a dancing suit. Which is real?"

"You found Leeba in a ballroom?" asked Kley. "What —?"

"Let's not go too fast," said the doc. "Did you ... try to bring her back?"

"I tried to shoot her full of poison, but she —" I shrugged. "She kicked me out. I don't know how though."

"It was *her* mind, after all. We simply tried to insert your ego into it, and she ... rejected it. That's all."

"Try it again, Pepke," said Kley. "While she's fresh."

The doc frowned. "That wouldn't apply, Kley. We can't be sure she's following a normal time sequence back there. She could be skipping around, glossing over unpleasant memories, drawing out the pleasant ones. However...."

He reached for the helmet.

"Now wait," I said. "Just hold on. I'm not going anywhere until I get these holes filled up. First, what's that funny hat?"

"It's part of a memorigraf unit. We recorded your memory before you went in. Now we'll simply replay your recent past, and you'll relive it all as it happened."

"No. Dammit ... NO!" They backed off a couple of paces, and I saw the look that passed between them: *Humor him, otherwise we won't be able to use him.*

They were right, too. I was damn well gonna take control of the situation or else tear up the lab.

"Okay, you." I pointed at the one called Kley. "Just tell me where we met, and how you got me to dive into your wife's mind."

"You were drunk."

"I had that figured already. Where was I?"

"In a little spaceport bar called the Venus Trap. You were dancing something called the Spaceman's Fling, and I came in and asked if there was anybody there from Scrag."

"Why?"

"Because that's where my wife was born."

I thought about Scrag until I got it pinned down in my mind. It

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was a memory I didn't particularly like to dwell on. "Okay. Go on."

"This is what she looked like before."

He held out a three-dee cube showing a girl with slate-colored hair, almond-shaped eyes, and a nose like some eight-year-old. You know how cute they are when the nose hasn't formed yet; later it might come out like a potato, but Leeba's had stayed in that cute stage. She had on a wedding outfit, with a bodice of woven pearls. I could see that Leeba was happy and not faking it for the photographer.

"Before what?" I asked.

"Before I went to Plaget's Planet. My family has some mines there."

"How long were you gone?"

"Seven years."

Seven years. And the man didn't realize. I kept looking at the memento cube, but I was thinking: Too bad, Kley, you're unique along with about three out of five other guys who do the long haul in out-space and come back cuddling your nest egg, only to find that those sweet kissable lips have gone off nuzzling some other jack who lacks your manly attributes and youthful good looks but nevertheless has the beauty of being here, while you're in the far-out, the black yonder, hawking up your lungs in a Thoride mine, or sweating your balls off in a steaming micle plantation, or frosting your ears on some twilight world hunting Fizzbuck furs....

But then Kley wouldn't have gone through that. The owners lived in bubble domes, with real grass and flowers grown on chemical mats. There was no reason why he couldn't have taken his bride along, except that the aristocracy liked their women to stay put, like potted plants.

I asked him: "Why the hell did you leave her on Earth?"

He shrugged. "She wouldn't go back to Scrag. Some social stigma involved."

Stigma? More like total ostracism. On Scrag you followed your man wherever he went, and if he died so did you — or you went into a special home for widows. On Scrag an unmarried female of breeding age was an outcast, a female pariah.

"How old was she?" I asked.

"Well, we were married that spring before I left. She was nineteen. We just had time for a short honeymoon before I shipped —"

"She get pregnant?"

"No, I told her I didn't want a child to be seven years old before I saw him. She ... finally agreed I was right."

I felt like hitting him over the head.

"Listen, Kley, I'll tell you how

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it is on Scrag. In winter nothing happens. All is frozen, so cold that steel breaks like glass. People stay in the domes, and they're in a kind of slow-down too. But when the ice melts, that's summer. The plants crack open the soil and shoot up; in a week the whole planet's a bubbling crawling mass of growing things. They've got two months until the first frost, see — and that's when those enormous Scraggin families get started. Nobody counts anything. There's complete sexual license. All females from sixteen to thirty get pregnant. That's the culture your wife grew up in."

"But she came to Earth when she was sixteen."

"You think that would break the pattern?"

"Why ... I don't know. But Leeba never acted ..." He blushed a little. "In fact, when I met her at the university, she was totally uninterested in the, uh, physical aspects of our relationship."

"You met her in winter?"

"Why ... yes."

"How'd she act when spring came?"

"A little forward sometimes, but —" he turned to the doc. "Is all this necessary?"

"Pepke shrugged. "Possibly, if he thinks it is."

"She write while you were gone?"

"Yes, I ..." He pulled out a folded sheaf of enlarged microfilms. "I arranged them in chronological order for the doctor ..."

I scanned them quickly. The first ones were the normal slop a young wife would write to her faraway lover, but after a year they started getting remote, as if she were writing to her second cousin because her mother told her to. There was a picture she'd sent him after he'd been gone three years. She mentioned that she was gaining weight, and I could see the marks that a Scrag summer puts on a woman: lips full and sensuous, breasts swollen into a heavy lushness, hips broader and legs heavier ... everything ready for the implantation of the child she would bear. She'd worn her hair in a twisting roll down in front of her left shoulder. On Scrag it means that a woman has no man and is receptive ....

I didn't mention this, nor did I point out that when a Scraggin woman is in the middle of her summer estrogen cycle, she'll grab what's available. I asked Kley what he'd found when he got back.

"My first hint was when she wasn't at the spaceport. I called home and got no answer. I went to the house we'd bought before I left, but it hadn't been lived in for months. My 'gram was unopened.

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My letters still sealed. I checked around and found out she'd sold the aircar, the furniture, the jewelry, clothes, everything. The house was bare." He looked down at his hands. "I'd been sending a large allowance to Leeba. She was going to spend only what she needed to live on and bank the rest, but ..."

"She didn't?"

"Oh, she *did*. But over a year ago she started making big withdrawals. She closed out the account two months ago. I found out she'd spent over fifty thousand in a place called Harry's Happy Return."

"A bar?"

"An illegal memorigraf parlor. That's where I found her. She was in a coma. I got her out of there and brought her here."

"Could I see her?"

Pepke nodded. We all went into the next room, and I saw Leeba for the first time in the flesh. She lay on an examining table, cold and pale, almost the color of the white gown which covered her from neck to ankles. Not a lush body now; thin and hollow-cheeked. A plastic hose carried nutrients into the vein of her arm. She looked around thirty-five, but I knew she was only twenty-six ... too young to stop her life and start rolling it backwards.

"How long has she been like that?"

Pepke was standing beside me in his white jacket. "I understand she's been comatose for over three weeks. Prior to that ..." He shrugged. "I checked around and got her history of memorigraf addition. She started four years ago, using a government-licensed parlor. Two years ago she switched to a clandestine parlor. So many do, since they want more than the legal limit of one hour per month. Leeba's visits grew more and more frequent, until finally she signed into the place full time. Most people can't afford a constant memory trip, otherwise these comas would be more common. Leeba could — and here she is."

Her eyelids were blue-translucent, like skim milk. I saw eye-movements behind them.

"What's going on inside her head?"

"She's there ... in her past. Living it mentally at the rate of a week per hour."

"I thought they had to be hooked up to a recording of their memory."

"Not when they're in a coma. The memory circuits go on ... and on and on, until death. At least that's the theory. Nobody's ever revived from a coma. So we're not sure what happens inside the mind."

I gave Pepke a sharp, searching look. "You weren't sure — and you

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sent me in anyway?"

The psych looked uncomfortable. "It's a new approach, I admit. My idea was to record your brain pattern and play it into her memory. That way you'd have an independent existence which couldn't be controlled by her mind. In other words, she'd project you in real, three-dimensional terms and fit you into the memory world of her own past."

"Okay. She did it — then I tried to kill her. Who's responsible for that?"

"I am," said Pepke. "I thought if you made her past unpleasant enough, she'd come out of her own free will. So I put you under hypnosis and gave you an automatic command. You couldn't have harmed her physically. You were just a projection of her mind."

"Crap," I said. "Didn't you ever hear of 'bang-utot'?"

They both blinked at me.

"There's a planet out near Fomalhaut where the natives died by nightmare. They dream they're dying, they die. How did you know she wouldn't?"

The doc looked gravely at Kley, who said "She's dying now, for God's sake! What could we lose? Bork, you agreed to help. You accepted money —"

"I was drunk, as you pointed out." I was developing a dislike for Kley, though I knew that a lot of it was jealousy. "Why didn't you go in yourself?"

"I'd have had no freedom of action. I was in her life, my role was laid out. It had to be someone she'd never known."

"Any of a million people —"

"But you grew up on Scrag. You knew the environment."

I had to laugh at that. "She was an aristocrat. I was a spaceport rat. We were worlds apart."

"Put it this way then. You were the first one I found. We didn't have a lot of time, you know."

I looked from one to the other for a full minute. I had the feeling I'd been picked because I was drunk — my usual condition when I hit port after a four-year tour on the frontier worlds. When I'm drunk I'll try anything that promises diversion ...

"I think you're lying. You know why? Because you wouldn't have had a role in the life she's reliving now. You didn't meet her until after she left Scrag." I turned to Pepke. "You've tried this before, I think. What happened?"

"It's hard to say, actually. It may be that the subject got caught up in the patient's past life and didn't want to leave. Or there could have been an ego struggle in the mind of the patient, with the result that ... uh, neither one survived."

"You mean the subject died with the patient?"

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He nodded. "It's happened."

I looked at Kley and felt the utter futility of trying to deal with people of his class. He had a code which applied only to other gentlemen; commoners like me could be lied to, cheated and exploited without causing the slightest pinprick on his noble conscience ....

"You're a bastard, Kley. And you, Pepke, are an accessory bastard." Pepke turned red, and Kley sputtered, but I went on: "I'll try to bring her out, but only because I don't want to see her die. And I'll make one condition. No hypnotic kill order. Otherwise I don't make the trip."

"I can wipe out the command," said the psych. "But, then, how will you bring her back?"

"I've got an idea," I said. "You'll have to let me work it out on my own. It has to do with ... hell, I can't explain it. You'll have to trust me, or get yourself another boy."

They went into a consultation, while I smoked a cigarette and contemplated Leeba's face. I couldn't reveal how eager I was to get back into her mind. My own youth had been miserable, and the only way I'd survived it was by having nothing to compare it with. Youth in Leeba's world ... wealth, good looks, a skill at dancing and conversation ... she'd given me all that, and I wanted more ....

Kley wanted to get another subject, but Pepke said it might be fatal to introduce a second extraneus personality into Leeba's memory. In the end they decided to accept me, since they had no choice.

Pepke injected me with scope and I drifted into the twilight zone. He put the domed hat on me and another hat on Leeba, who lay in the cot beside mine; then they hooked our heads together with wires. It was a slow blending of two worlds, with one picture coming in and the other fading out. I could see Doc and Kley watching me, while behind them on the white walls appeared a grove of trees in the Scrag countryside. It was so vivid and brilliant that the two men seemed covered with dust and then faded out entirely. I smelled the lushness of growing plants, the humus of the forest. I felt strange emotions: I was a bud about to flower, a butterfly laying eggs, a cow swollen with milk, a bee whirling in the madness of a mating swarm ....

Spring on Scrag. The frenzied time, the surge of life after the long freeze ....

I am Leeba. No, I am myself, inside her mind. I see through her eyes and feel with her emotions. The shape of her body envelops me; the weight of her breasts lie on my

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chest; I feel her heaviness of hip and thigh ... a sense of rapport with hard thrusting things, an urge to encompass all objects masculine.

We sit in a grove, Leeba and I. Giant trees arch four hundred feet overhead, their massive trunks a rust-red color, like crinkled metal. The sunlight filters down through the yellow leaves and falls on thick blue-green grass. A blue-scaled lizard flaps his red leathery wings and flies over the clearing with his long yellow crest flowing out behind him. Other boys and girls lie about the clearing, some dressed in leaves and skirts of grass, some wearing nothing at all.

I sense a calmness in Leeba's mind, also a pleasant fatigue. All day she has worked in the forest to build her bower; set the green saplings so they would arch over, then tied them together and laid the matted *gelo* vines on top. She has spread the floor with soft *puka* moss and laid a carpet of blossoms at the entrance, hung scented herbs from the roof and buried the aphrodisiac root of the *bakaka* beneath the threshold. Tonight after the mating dance, she will lead a young man across the threshold ....

She wonders who he will be but feels no anxiety because the outing will last three weeks and the first night is not binding. If she doesn't fall in love with him, she will choose another, and then another, until she finds a husband. Those who fail to mate during the coming-of-age tour will probably never mate. Another reason she feels no anxiety is that she knows all her would-be suitors; they are boys she grew up with, boys of her own social class ....

So she digs her bare toes in the grass and waits for the sun to go down; the roots are cool and love is a warm syrup flowing through her loins ....

I push my thought into her consciousness:

Remember me, Leeba? At the dance, eight years ago?

Her memory spins back, the years like windows in a lighted train rushing past. Ah, there I am, the blond, blue-eyed, graceful lad in leotards. Now the clock runs forward: my shoulders broaden, my legs grow thick and muscular, my cheeks are touched with golden down. I stand behind her, a teasing smile around my mouth, with yellow hair lying on my shoulders.

"Look at me, Leeba."

She turns, and her brain crawls with revulsion. My smile twists into a leer; the twinkling blue eyes glow red, demonic. My teeth become pointed, yellow-stained; my hands curve into claws; my body warps into a grotesque hunched horror ....

"Is this how you remember me, Leeba?"

Her lips trembled. "The ... last

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time you had a needle."

"Not this time, I promise."

She wet her lower lip with her tongue. I saw perspiration dampen her shoulders, and I felt the icy knot of fear in her stomach.

"Go away, *please* ..."

I tried to bring back the shape of the young man, but I was dissolving like soap foam, flaking away like a peeling coat of paint. The bird noises in the clearing grew faint and far away, and I thought, *I must take control before she kicks me out again.*

JUMP!

The sun was lower. Time had passed. I was the youth again, grotesquerie was gone. I felt a lusty sense of power. I stood alone in the clearing, wearing a loincloth of woven bark. Where were the others? Oh, yes, now I heard the splashing and laughing. I walked toward the sounds, feeling the long muscles slide in my legs, and I drew the air like wine into my lungs.

The pool was clear as crystal, its surface like shattered mirrors reflecting the trees overhead. I looked past the young people splashing in the water, and I saw Leeba, lying on a rock and watching a flowerlike animal which clung to a tree and rolled out a long sticky tongue to catch flying insects.

I walked toward her. The green of the rocks and the sun filtering through the leaves tinted her flesh a lemon-yellow. I looked down at her nude body and felt a surge of maleness. I laughed.

She sat up. Her eyes stared, her mouth opened to scream. I felt something in my hand. I looked down and saw a long curved dagger glittering in the sun.

I concentrated, and the dagger became a silver flower. I knelt and held it out to her.

"I told you it wouldn't be like the last time, Leeba."

She searched my eyes; I saw tiny beads of perspiration trapped in the down of her upper lip.

"What is it ... this time?"

"This time I want to stay with you."

"You can't — can you?"

"If you help me, I can."

"Why should I help you?"

"Because ... you want me."

I leaned toward her, and her eyes grew large. They were the color of caramel flaked with gold. I smelled the warm salt-tang of sun on flesh and —

Leeba jumped, mentally, into a twisted tangle of chaos, confetti-jangle of reality spiraling down the black hole into death. I reached out and seized the illusion, held on until it solidified around me.

She sat in a circle of young people, looking into the campfire. I walked up behind her. "Mind if I sit beside you?"

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She answered curtly. "There are other spaces. Other girls."

"Not for me, Leeba." I put my hand on her shoulder —

Again she jumped into chaos. Again, I held on.

— I stood outside a circle of about thirty boys. One was beating a drum, another played a flute. A yellow-haired girl stood inside the circle, facing the line of boys who marched around in time to the music. She wore a dirndl and a blindfold.

The beat of the music speeded up; the boys danced faster. I saw Leeba waiting with the other girls on the opposite side of the circle.

Suddenly the music stopped. The drummer rose and took the blindfold off the yellow-haired girl. She blinked at the young man who'd stopped in front of her, and laughed and seized his hand. Together they ran into the forest.

Another girl was pushed into the center ... a small girl with glossy black hair, who giggled as they tied on her blindfold. She was mated with a dark, rawboned youth. Shyly, looking down at the ground, they walked out of the firelight.

Two more girls, then Leeba. She looked wild and wanton. Gold rings gleamed in her ears, red boots came up to her calves, and a spangled skirt reached halfway to her knees. She raised her face for the blindfold, and her bosom swelled above the low blouse. She was the fairest of all, the drum thumped louder than before, and the dancing boys devoured her with eyes glinting red in the firelight.

I heard the music swell toward crescendo. I ran up and broke into the circle. There were angry shouts behind me; then the music stopped and they took off her blindfold.

She looked at me and spat one word:

"You!"

She whirled and ran, red boots on flashing white legs. I ran after her, bounding over the spongy turf and into the forest. Laughter followed me, along with girlish yelps and shouts of encouragement from the boys.

She tripped on a tasseled boot and fell; I landed on top of her. She writhed and twisted, but I caught her waist between my knees and pinned her wrists to the ground. She stretched her neck and yelled:

"Help! Help!"

"They won't come, Leeba."

She went limp. "You cheated. You weren't in the dance when they blindfolded me. I looked."

"*You* cheated. You're supposed to take me to your bower."

"I won't."

"All right. Seems a shame to waste it, but ..."

I bent down, but the mirror warped, shimmered like a wet windowpane.

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"No, Leeba. Not another one of your backward trips. This is the best time, you told me that."

"I hate you. I hate —!"

I stopped her words with my lips — and suddenly I knew what hooks the youth-addict. It wasn't memory of the first kiss, it *was* ... the first touch of girl-flesh, the first crackling surge of electricity up my legs, the clutch of my lungs.

It was the same for her. I heard the hiss of air through her nostrils, felt the heat of her face and the soft relaxation of her body. Her arms went hesitantly, then strongly around my back. After a moment I whispered hoarsely:

"Where is your bower?"

She rose and took my hand and led me silently through the forest. Stooping, she led me into the perfumed bower. I heard the soft creak of moss as she lay down, saw the dim glow of her body and the sheen of her golden earrings ....

A long time later she asked:

"Who are you?"

"Bork."

"How did you get here?"

I put my hand on her forehead. "You brought me, through here. I was hired by your husband."

She sat up suddenly. "That hasn't happened yet."

"For me it has."

"You come from the future?"

"Leeba, you know how it is. Don't you?"

"I want you to tell me, Bork."

I told her about the memorigraf. About my body and hers, lying side by side in the clinic on Earth, a billion billion miles and many years away ....

"... But our brains are dying. Yours and mine. You have a month left, I have a little more. A month there, that's fourteen years here — if you decide to stay."

"Could you stay with me?"

"For a while. But eventually they'll unhook me. After a few hours, a day at the most. I'd be with you a few months, maybe a year; then I'd be gone."

"But if I remembered you, and you existed in my memory —"

"Don't forget I'm still back there. It's my conscious will that keeps me going. Once they unhook me, I'm out of it. You couldn't keep the illusion going, now that you know it's an illusion."

She was silent a long time; then she said:

"A while ago ... nothing happened, did it?"

"Yes. It happened."

"But not really. I couldn't have a baby."

"Not a real baby, no."

"But — it was so perfect. So frighteningly real and so ... *nice.*"

"Why wouldn't it be? You made it, with your mind."

"But didn't you have the same —?"

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"It was perfect for me too. I made it, with my mind."

"I don't want it that way. Like a dream."

"There's another dream. Maybe you'd like that better."

"What is it?"

"You know. The luxury house, Kley, your husband. He's tall, brown-eyed, honest, upright, faithful, devoted — rich."

"I don't want him. I want you."

"All right."

"You mean ... you'd be with me, like we are now?"

"Like we are now, yes."

"How?"

"Just relax, Leeba. You're getting sleepy. Close your eyes and let your muscles flow. Trust me. I'll take care of everything ..."

She slept. I visualized the bare walls of the clinic. I built up a picture of Kley and the psych sitting there; I saw the wires running from the helmet on Leeba's head to the head of Bork on the other cot. Slowly the picture formed, shimmered ... jelled.

I opened my eyes and saw Leeba sitting up, blinking. Kley walked over and took her hand.

"Leeba, are you all right now?"

"Kley? She stretched out her hand and touched his face. "I hardly remember you. It's been ... an awfully long time."

"We'll go as soon as you're strong enough. Everything will be like it was before."

"Before ...?" She rubbed her hands over her face as though brushing away cobwebs.

"It'll come back to you."

She swung her legs to the floor and stood up. Her eyes circled the room and passed over me, then returned. I smiled at her, and a flash of recognition lit up her eyes.

"Bork?"

"Welcome back, Leeba."

Pepke stepped between us and took her arm. "Come, I'll give you something to build up your strength."

Kley grabbed her other arm, and the two started out supporting her between them. Even with her weakness, she managed to twist free and turn to me.

"Bork, you promised —!"

I stood up and held out my arms, and her frail thin body melted against me. Over her head my eyes met Kley's, and I saw his dawning comprehension.

"You understand how it is, old man." I said. "I was there first."

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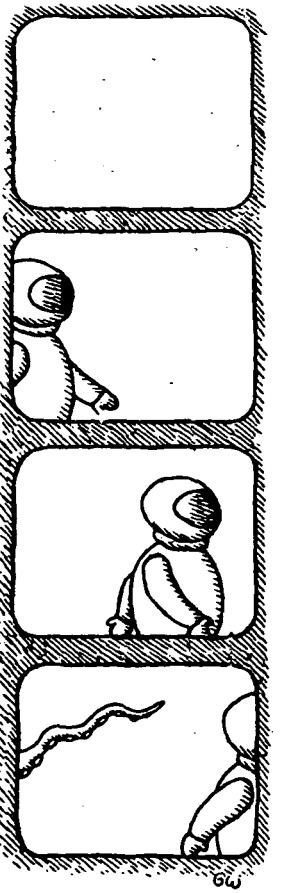
The major part of this month's column will again be devoted to the series, *Space 1999*. Has my negative opinion of last month changed after seeing five more episodes? Has the series gotten into some sort of stride? Will it be another *Star Trek*? No, no, and no.

Why then am I wasting time on it? "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all," as Thumper said in *Bambi*. Well, that is fine for normal civilized people, but critics are not bound to be civilized, particularly if they care about the field in which they are reviewing. I've been feeling rather good about science fiction lately. It's been maturing rapidly from within, and gaining respectful and sensible attention from without; I've felt the defensive and sometimes derogatory attitudes held by some fairly big names in the field, on being associated with that "Buck Rogers stuff," were old fashioned and unjustified.

Space 1999, at this point, seems well on its way to being a hit (which may partially be accounted for by the dreariest TV season ever). If it is a major success, it will be a force in shaping the public image of s/f, just as much as Buck

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



Rogers and Flash Gordon did in the mass medium (the comic strips) of their day. I don't particularly want to start a crusade, but I think those of us with high standards better start marshalling our arguments for when we start being accused of liking that "Space 1999 stuff."

Last month, on the basis of two episodes, I made the point (s) that the show made no attempt to logically justify any of its speculative elements (the moon has been "blown out of Earth's orbit" into "intergalactic space" with a lunar colony aboard); that it was equally sloppy dramatically (the inter-relationship in s/f between basic concept and plot/dramatic structure is subtle, but very strong); that the show looked damn good, particularly in the hardware, special effects, and costume departments.

All of this has held through seven episodes now. Trans-Plutonian or "intergalactic space" or wherever they are is just chock full of various planets (none of which seem to be attached to suns) and intelligences (who tend to turn up as blue balls of light — this seems to be the predominant shape of intelligent life in the universe). We have had the eternal life bit, with a crowd that started out just a few years before our bunch, but through a convenient "time warp" have lived880 years since then. But, heavens to Betsy, they are — gasp — sterile (!). And there was the base member that gets hit by one of those blue balls and becomes a sort of were-refrigerator, i.e. periodically he turns pink and freezes everything and everybody he touches.

We have had the lotus land bit — a planet that looked like the universe's largest cotton field. That was admittedly pretty spectacular in a Ziegfeld Follies sort of way, complete with beautiful girl descending a staircase from a hole hanging in space. She turned out to be the messenger of the Guardian of the planet, and — gasp again — a robot, because the human population hadn't been perfect enough.

For stunning visual effects combined with absolute nonsense, though, the cake-taker episode had a beautiful, ageless, white haired lady in a cobweb-hung space ship who announced that she was "Ardra of Etheria" (or some such — I'm going by ear) and not even the fine actress Margaret Leighton could bring *that* off. Seems she wants our stalwart base commander to do something on faith or she'll hit Luna/Alpha with her planet, and he doesn't and she doesn't and the planet doesn't (it just disappears) and it was all so metaphysical you could smell it.

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I'm sorry — I want clear and coherent concepts, both dramatic and speculative, and this show fails in both ways. Innumerable s/f writers have proved that they can do it in print, and *Star Trek* proved it could be done on TV. Lord knows, not every episode of that show was admirable, but enough were sufficiently intelligent to make this series, despite its superior production, look like the pulp fiction (in the worst sense) that it is.

As for other matters on the small screen this month, ABC came up with a minor but amusing winner in "The New Original Wonder Woman" (all the adjectives are because there was a disastrous TV movie last year that attempted to update the story and failed miserably). This one succeeded for several reasons. The mythological/fantasy elements were kept in — there was a long opening sequence on Paradise Island in which Cloris Leachman nearly stole the show as WW's mum, the Queen of the Amazons. And the whole thing was done as straight and uncamped as the strip used to be, and with a fine sense of period. The brilliantined pompador of Lyle Waggoner as Steve Trevor was a sight to behold, as was the snood of the villainous spy, Marcia.

Literary (?) dept .... Speaking of *Star Trek*, Ballantine has got out a *Star Trek Star Fleet Technical Manual*, which is the most amusing non-book of the year. It's full of schematic drawings and information on everything from anabolic protoplasers to the Romulan Star Empire peace treaty. While one might wish that this amount of creative imagination had been used for Heinlein's Space Patrol or Dickson's Dorsai, the source doesn't really matter. The reader is given a wealth of the sort of trivia of a created future universe that s/f fans (Trekky or not) love, and it's all grand fun.

Not to beat a dead horse, but it might be pointed out that it's extremely dubious as to whether the universe of *Space 1999* has or ever will have the depth of concept to make an Alpha Technical Manual.

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Well, here it is: a bicentennial fantasy! And a darn good one. Mary-Carter Roberts writes: "I've written the wonderful ride of Tench Tilghman as fantasy — because that sharpens its point, I think — but it is all true. A few years ago, some misguided person tried to re-ride it but found it was not possible under modern conditions. It took him about two weeks, I think . . ."

Ride, Colonel, Ride!

by MARY-CARTER ROBERTS

The ghost of the general, sitting at the table in the headquarters tent, signed the despatch, quill scratching. The ghost of the colonel stood opposite, watching. Everywhere in America, except in the souls of certain ardent beings, it was October 19, 1974. For those exceptional ones, however, it was October 19, 1781. They were on the field at Yorktown. The British had just surrendered to them. Every year their deathless memories brought that day of history back to them and their spirits returned to the scene to relive it.

Washington rolled the paper, his immense hands seeming incongrous at a clerkly task, but performing swiftly. He looked up at Tilghman. The colonel was not what anyone would spontaneously consider a small man, being of middle height, square-shouldered, compact and hard, but he appeared small beside George Washington. As did most men. For Washington's greatness came from what was within him and had a mere chance expression in his giant frame. That, not his physical bigness, made other men seem comparatively less, no matter what their measurements.

Tilghman was used to this relativity. He had been Washington's aide and secretary for years. But his awareness of his chief's superiority had never touched or even approached his own integrity. Instead, he had fought the Revolution through with a serene mind precisely because of Washington's greatness, which he recognized as suited to the Revolutionary cause. That cause, as far as military and political forces went, was weak. Its only strength was its tremendous rightness. Washington symbolized that. He symbolized it and would always symbolize it, whatever the

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circumstances, the colonel was confident. General Washington was dependable. Very well.

For everything else that the Revolution involved, Colonel Tilghman had had a neat disposal. That the Americans might lose he had always known but had considered that that was the only bad thing that could happen and was a chance they had taken. War was war. Now they had won.

Chin sunk on chest, he stood watching.

And, because he was young and possessed of a vivid realistic memory, he relived in a few seconds a series of other moments when he had observed his chief. At West Point, the morning Washington had come to eat breakfast with Arnold — and Arnold had run, the reek of treason on the air behind him. At Newburgh, when Washington had patiently replied to commonplace but necessary men who hoped, while they also feared, that their massed weight would destroy him. At Trenton, in a storm of lead and snow. At Valley Forge, in a quietness of snow and hunger. It was indeed a future textbook of American history that passed through the colonel's mind, but to him it was, all of it, the present — so much had this war been a single event for him. On this day of victory there was no past. The whole Revolution was there. It was the air — eager, new and wonder-promising — that he and Washington were breathing.

Washington held the despatch out across the table. Tilghman stepped forward to take it. Then Washington changed his mind and rose, towered massively to his feet, bringing his graying red hair, which had not seen powder for weeks, close to the tent top. His battle dress was rumpled and stained, and his jaw showed sandy stubble. Vast and untidy he was, and there was something for him to do and say that would carry on the action of history. He did it and he said it — handed the despatch to his aide, who was to be history's messenger, and in a crisp official tone pronounced the words: "To the Congress, sir." Colonel Tilghman took the roll. The news of a great turn "in the course of human events" was in his hands.

He said, "Yes, sir. To the Congress."

And the brevity of the phrase that carried so mighty a meaning amused them both. They smiled. Their weathered faces, like windows briefly opened, showed some of the light that was in the hearts of the Continentals everywhere on the field that morning.

"Ride, Colonel," said George Washington, still quiet and crisp but no longer quite official.

"Yes, sir," said the colonel

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again. He turned and went out.

The 1974 field of Yorktown, a National Monument, sweet and pleasant in the autumn sun, was almost empty of 1974 people. A few cars were moving along the tour road, a few small groups of sightseers were strolling over the grass. The long peace, the established honor, were there. None of that was visible to the ghost of Colonel Tench Tilghman, aide and secretary to General George Washington. The vitality of 1781 was in him and made the world around him. He saw the field of the Revolutionary battle. The sun of 1781 shone on his head and the earth of 1781 crunched beneath his boots.

There were tents and camps everywhere in his view. Soldiers in many kinds of dress were streaming about, the French bright in the uniforms of their national tradition, some Americans faded in blue and buff, others grim in frank makeshifts. There were the graves of the men killed at Redoubts 9 and 10 — two low ridges of raw dirt, one for the French, one for the Americans — but these at least were not visibly different from one another. They looked exactly alike. And there were the guns, the previous tools of the siege that had brought the enemy down. From the French fleet they had come, bearing beautifully wrought little iron dolphins of their carriages (along with the Bourbon crest) to show that they were naval armament. Yes, the guns. Fetched halfway round the world, to make the whole world different.

All the thousands of men on the 1781 field knew what had taken place. A few thousand additional people in the immediate vicinity likewise knew it — and those were all. The thing that had happened at Yorktown was still contained at Yorktown. Nobody beyond was aware. It was Colonel Tench Tilghman who was to carry the world its news — its news that, from now on, it would be different.

He thought, as he stood there outside Washington's tent, that this was too big a thing for a man to perform. All he had to do, of course, was what Washington had said — ride. And he had ridden at Washington's command many, many times. Spurred through sun, through dark, through rain, through dust, through sleet, through bullets. He and his horse had been like an extension of George Washington's mind and voice. This was not the same....

A family of 1974 tourists strolled by the place where he, the ghost, was standing. They were carrying picnic baskets. The parents, as they walked along, were imbibing soft drink from bottles. A young boy was eating a candy bar.

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A slightly smaller girl was crunching potato chips that, with machinelike regularity, she passed from a shiny cellophane bag into her crumb-ringed mouth. A still smaller boy was licking a sucker.

"Let's eat here," said the mother, pointing with her bottle. "We can spread lunch out on those big rocks."

The place she indicated was the graves of the men of Redoubts 9 and 10. By 1974 they had been marked with low broad stones — were heaps of raw earth no longer. She, her husband and offspring, were invisible to the Revolutionary colonel....

He looked instead at his horse, tethered a few yards from Washington's tent, rolling an expectant eye, knowing that he would be in service soon, giving the ground before him light scrapes to indicate his scorn at the temporary condition of being still. A half dozen strides, a foot up, a spring, knees and reins where they ought to be — and man and animal would be one, and that one would be motion. On the way. En route. "To the Congress." Which phrase meant: "To the United States in Congress Assembled." The place where the United States were Assembled in Congress was Philadelphia. Philadelphia was two hundred and fifty land and water miles away.

Take the strides, vault to the saddle — and go. That was what he should do. The colonel stood still. The greatness of the time encased him. He, who was to be the principle of motion, felt that he could not start.

Then he heard a crunching of earth under quickly moving boots and knew that someone was hurrying around the tent, undoubtedly to see the general. He stepped away from the entrance. But the oncomer was quicker than he. The oncomer swung around the tent's corner in strides that were simply headlong, and he and the Colonel collided. There was a sputter of apologies, and then the two stood looking into one another's faces, laughing.

The impetuous walker was, by his dress, a general in the Continental forces. He was tall, slim, elegant and proud, but chiefly he was young. He was very young. He was in fact the youngest general the American Army ever was to have. He was La Fayette.

The joy that flamed in his face was indescribable. It was the profound perception of the new thing that was in the world — expressed with the happiness of a boy. This rapture he instantly applied to Tilghman's mission, of which he had been apprised.

"So it is you, Colonel!" he cried. "It is you who carry our

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light. And already you are en route. To the Congress!"

He broke off his speech to laugh. The colonel, who also was young, but reflective, and who knew this war as he knew his favorite classics — intricately, analytically, possessively — the colonel remembered that it was this gay-faced boy before him who, with a skeleton force, had pinned the veteran Cornwallis down and held him until Washington, Rochambeau and the guns had come. La Fayette. He and Tilghman had seen action together in many engagements. Now they looked into one another's eyes and laughed. Then suddenly La Fayette embraced Tilghman.

"Ride, Colonel," he said. *"Ride!"*

And so it was that the tremendous weight of Tilghman's duty, as it had come to him from George Washington, was diffused. It ceased to rest on his mind alone. It went into his blood.

Within seconds he was in his saddle racing toward the river, where, as he knew, his boat was ready, and he went just as a bird goes — straight. Fences, hedges, ditches — these he jumped, also the now empty trenches of the battlefield. Straight. To the United States in Congress Assembled. He was on the way.

This, the first stage of his journey, passed as if he were simply a thought. Nothing material seemed to be involved. There was himself and a fine horse complementing one another. There was the rush of air, the sounds of hooves and flying clods — and all of it forward, forward, forward. Then it was over. He came to the landing. It had taken him less than a minute.

The second stage would need twenty-four hours. It would be down the York River to Chesapeake Bay to Rock Hall, where the Philadelphia road began. It was a hundred and thirty-odd miles, for which distance the colonel and his horse would be passengers, would be carried vehicularly without control to the transportation, a passive time for his body with the drive of his mind kept in motion by a separate agency — a boat. Sail, wood, wind, water, skipper and crew. As Washington had told him, preparations for all this had been ordered. Very well. Let the second stage begin.

He dismounted. Only the one boat was at the formerly busy dock — the British had destroyed all craft they could lay hands on. The one boat, however, was the right one for the colonel's mission. It was a two-masted Bay schooner, stout and fast. Obviously it was ready. Its gangplank was laid, and, as the colonel pulled up, a man who

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looked expectant came forward along the deck toward him. He was weather-stained and shabby, but so were most Americans in those days. The colonel recognized authority. This would be the skpper. He identified himself. That is, he stated his name and destination — "Colonel Tilghman. For Rock Hall." The skipper said, "At your pleasure, sir," Colonel Tilghman turned to lead his horse aboard.

He then encountered something that he expected — the animal made an assertion of independence. He was a young stallion with a nature compounded of fine-edged fire and a keen but wrathful intelligence. He had traveled by boat many times; boats were no novelty to him; he objected, however, to leaving his natural habitat with too great crudeness. He required some ceremony. He therefore always made a token resistance. The colonel dealt with the requirement respectfully. When the skipper, looking on, called, "Some help, sir?" he replied, "No need," and personally conducted Black Damn aboard and to his stall below. The name was the Army rendering of Black Damask, the appellation under which the colonel had received his mount. A patriotic lady had made him a gift of the colt; that was what she had called him. The soldiers liked to explain that they had added the *n* to make it clear that they intended no reflection on the colonel's steed's sex.

His horse in a stall with hay supplied; General Washington's despatch to the Continental Congress in his saddle bag; himself on the boat; the boat in motion. The colonel returned to the deck. They were already out into the river.

All along the banks were the remains of burned craft, from ocean-going cargo boats to skiffs. The village of Yorktown looked like an arrangement of walls, shell-riddled. The British had burned and looted, had spoiled wells, had maltreated civilians. They had enticed slaves to desert masters, promising freedom, and had not kept their word but had held the slaves in pens, where many of them had died. Incidents. Parts of a war the whole of which Colonel Tilghman contained, now summed up in one word — over! Cornwallis was taken.

The colonel was familiar with the York River. He was familiar with Chesapeake Bay. And it seemed to him that he was sailing a new stream toward newness illimitable. He was, he realized, alone with his tremendous knowledge. Only he knew. He was carrying the news. En route....

The 1974 river was, at the moment, the scene of an impromptu powerboat race. Three enthus-

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iasts of the type that prolongs the boating season to the end of open water, came roaring upstream, the slowest of them doing fifty miles an hour, hulls nothing but shells for engines, engines endowed with the strength of two hundred Black Damns. The course of one of these detonating midgets coincided with that of the schooner, so that the vessels passed through one another. The wave-laced prow of the twentieth-century craft entered the eighteenth-century hull just below Tilghman's feet, then glided on through the ghost horse below. The driver had been shrieking "Yippee!" He went on shrieking "Yippee!"....

Colonel Tilghman was familiar with boats, yes. He was a native of Maryland's Eastern Shore, a country intimate with the tides, a land whose people for a hundred and fifty years had used their streams for roads quite naturally. His family seat had been on the Tred Avon River near a flourishing international seaport — Oxford. He had been given his own boat when he was a boy, and it had been expected of him that he would handle the craft well. He was intelligently aware therefore of everything that was being done on the schooner and of the currents of air and stream that had determined the doing — but the awareness was subconscious. It registered the facts that they were making six knots, which was right, and that the skipper was apparently competent. The rest of the colonel's mind set its vision ahead. The river gleamed, for the sun of that day cast all shadows behind.

News of victory. He would deliver the despatch to the American Chief Executive, the President of the United States in Congress Assembled, an official elected by the Congressmen from their own number to serve for one year, at present Mr. McKean of Delaware. A lawyer. The Congress would then receive its vindication. It had authorized the Army to make war, and now the Army was giving it the peace. It would carry on its duties unchallenged, no longer a body of rebels with prices on their heads, but the lawmakers of the American nation.

What these lawmakers ought to do — of that the colonel did not think, now that the privilege of thinking had been attained. He had taken part in discussions of the subject, sometimes heated ones, in the tents and by the campfires of the Army. From the earnestness with which he and his fellow officers had proclaimed their views of the war's purpose, it might have been assumed that they were all professors of statecraft — young Colonel Alexander Hamilton had had a particularly clear philosophy.

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They had all matched wits, matched erudition, sometimes matched shouts, occasionally seemed near to matching blows — mud on their boots, stubble on their faces, hunger in their stomachs. To fight the enemy was their reason for existence, and for it they kept lead, powder, guns, blades and horses ready. And still they had theorized and talked.

What would his comrades be doing this morning? The colonel wondered briefly. Not talking. Of that he was sure. Now that the future had become the present, it did not need the sustenance of talk. What would the chaps be doing then? Chores of army housekeeping of course. Inspecting, giving orders, getting them, keeping a sharp eye. All routine — except that nothing, nothing anywhere, was routine now or would ever be routine again. The Revolution was won. The future — yes — was here.

Colonel Tench Tilghman, aide, secretary and courier to General George Washington, remained throughout the morning on the deck of the ship that was transporting him. They left the York and came out into the bay. In the afternoon, at the shipper's invitation, the colonel went to the cabin and had a meal — some cold meat, biscuit and brandy. He had not eaten since the afternoon preceding. No one in Washington's headquarters had remembered food.

He then went below to visit Black Damn. The stallion was quiet — or as quiet as he ever was, which was not really quiet at all. When Black Damn was not lifting a hoof, he still implied that he was running. Motionless, he was like a picture of an arrow in flight. He was made of motion. He greeted the colonel with a rolling eye and his usual comradely wrathfulness. The colonel said, "Yes sir, yes sir," and made sounds that confirmed a relationship. Black Damn understood. If the colonel respected him, he also respected the colonel. The man freshened the hay, the horse let his head brush the assisting arm, they both enjoyed it. The colonel said, "You, sir," lay down on the main hay pile and went to sleep. He had had three hours rest the night before.

He was awakened by a movement that he instantly knew was wrong. It was the one movement that should not have been — a movement that meant movement's cessation. In seconds he was on deck, but even before that he had guessed the situation.

They had reached Tangier Shoal, the vast shallows that surrounds Tangier Island. Every Chesapake Bay waterman knew the facts about it — that its area stayed much the same and its depths changed all the time. One season

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there would be clear passage between given points across it, the next there would be bars. Sense, the colonel thought, should keep any man from it, any man with a boat in the schooner's draft. But sense had not kept away his skipper. The schooner was aground.

His first beating impulse was to shoot the fool. The idea was gone before it formed. The colonel gave his mind to taking things in.

He could see nothing, for it was by then dark, but he grasped what had occurred. The wind had changed, backing from southwest to east. Fighting this contrary air, the skipper had tacked too far east and put his ship on a bar. The calamity should not have happened to him — and it could happen to anybody. It was so common a sailing accident as to be both forgivable and unforgivable. None of that mattered now. What did matter was that the tide was falling. They could not get off again; they would not be in motion again, until the turn. Eight hours.

Colonel Tilghman had fought the Revolution through. That meant that he had learned to wait, for the essential art of that war had been the art of waiting. Not that the Revolution had been for *merely* patient men. Patience it had bred — yes. But impatience had bred it. In its fighters a special kind of endurance had resulted. A mettle that did not fade while in abeyance. A capacity for a quiet, tough, leathery wariness. Tilghman was an adept at this. But he had laid it aside for the victory ride. The war's attitudes were past — an end for the need to bear delays! Could there be delays for a man carrying his news? There could be delays. Wind, sandbars and tides were unresponsive to history. The United States had waited a determined eight years. Now they would have to wait an interminable eight hours.

Tilghman spoke to the skipper with civility. The man had done an inexcusable thing that would have to be excused. Since he was not to be shot, he might receive the amenities. The colonel presently joined him in the cabin for brandy.

The amenities, however, were limited to human conduct. The weather made nothing of them. The wind blew harder. It filled the pitch-dark air with flying water, bitter cold. On the schooner nothing was warm and nothing that was exposed was dry. Colonel Tilghman's reaction to this was outside the discipline of any philosophy. It came from his body.

He knew what it was to take extremes of heat, cold and wet on a never very well-nourished physique. He knew that as did every man who had been through the successive campaigns of the war. Since Valley

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Forge, however, an enemy had entered his hard, compact, extremely competent frame. It was something that generally went by the name of "recurrent fever." It expressed itself through the chills and a burning temperature. He ignored it to himself and, where other men were concerned, concealed it by passing the attack off as a "brief indisposition." That he actually had something wrong with him he was not going to admit.

The concealment had been easy. Other men had indispositions — and his came infrequently. He had them only when he exerted himself.

He did not consider that he had been doing that that October 19. His three hours of sleep the previous night had been on ground that was quite dry. Throughout the days of the battle he had been with Washington, keeping Washington's pace, which was simply that of a commanding general in the culminating action of his war. For the colonel it had involved writing and delivering despatches, making inspections and reports, accompanying his chief on reconnaissance by day and night, attending conferences where his knowledge of French was useful in translating, being always ready. Certainly none of that was exertion. Victory — exertion? Never had any of them felt better. They were impatient men finally released from patience.

But the wind down Chesapeake Bay cared nothing for that. The enemy within the colonel stirred. He felt the indisposition coming.

There was a bunk below. He could lie down. He stayed on deck. The wretched seizure would have to pass. He would not recognize it....

The Bay of 1974 was invested with very different weather. It had a light southerly wind of almost summer warmth. Its sky was clear and ornamented with a notably pretty moon, a moon so pretty as to cause a young 1974 woman who was cruising past Tangier Shoal to comment. Sighing, she said, "Somehow I just *can't* think of it as a rocket base. How can you rhyme 'rocket base' with 'June'?"

The man who was with her replied that whatever happened to "moon," there would always be Junes in the calendars and they would provide the necessary rhyme for "spoon," which was what was important. For his own part, he declared, he could rhyme "spoon" with "October," if that was required. "Like this," he added, and kissed her.

They were a young married couple who were romantically doing their first housekeeping on a boat. Yielding to the delicious weather, they had gone that evening for a ride. They were passing close to the schooner of

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1781, but were in a safe depth, not only because the bar was somewhere else that season, but also because they had charts and channel markers.

They were in their different ways very happy. The girl, with marriage, had found herself amazed at her new awareness. In quite ordinary things there were depths and depths of wonder, she had discovered. She lived, as it seemed to her, in a state of waiting, from one lovely revelation to another. The man recognized that he had never before been so comfortable and was tenderly appreciative of the dear little creature whose existence made so agreeable a supplement to his own.

She stopped looking at the moon. She stared levelly into the dark. She had been humorously coquettish. Now she became intent, took on an air as if she were trying to see where there was nothing to be seen. "Jack," she said, "do you *feel* something?"

He inquired, "Like what?"

She answered, "Like — like there was something — *somebody* — there?"

She stretched out a slim arm and pointed. She was looking at the space where Tilghman stood, looking actually into his fever-burning eyes, her love-awakened sensitivity making her able to "feel," as she said, what was beyond her senses' reach. "Something," she whispered urgently, "almost ghostly?"

Her husband laughed indulgently. A crazy little cute thing, wasn't she?...

The schooner got off an hour after midnight, at which time neither the skipper nor Colonel Tilghman needed to put into words the fact that Rock Hall, or any point on the Eastern Shore, was out of the question. The wind stated that for them. They were obliged to head west. They made for Annapolis, thereby adding a delay that was simply beyond contemplation — twelve hours, at least.

The colonel continued to ignore the indisposition. He burned with fever from within? Well, he had burned under a scorching sun on many a march. The chills raced over his skin? Well, he had slept on snowy ground more than once. The message — To the Congress.

He watched carefully over Black Damn, who, when his wretched second-journey stage was past, would intelligently and efficiently carry him on the third. And swiftly. That was why he had brought Black Damn along.

Most of the ride to Philadelphia would have to be on post horses, and post horses were not much. The best of them were no more than strong and steady. They did not fly — and Black Damn flew.

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They were not easy-gaited — and Black Damn's movement was velvet. Colonel Tilghman would cut down his dependence on the inferior beasts by riding Black Damn out. He soothed the stallion, waited on him and sympathized. Use patience. Yes, though you are made of fine fire and impatience is your genius. What is a turn of wind and weather? The turn was in the course of human events.

They reached Annapolis the evening of the next day. The wind had not abated. Nor had the colonel's indisposition. At least, he thought, it must be due to that offensive visitation that, at one point, as he walked along the dark waterfront toward an inn, he felt curiously aware of the presence of something that he did not see.... The fact was that he was passing through the Crypt of the United States Naval Academy Chapel where, in 1974, the mortal remains of his friend, Captain John Paul Jones, were resting in perpetual honor. The spirit of the mighty sea fighter profoundly invested the place. Colonel Tilghman, the ghost, vital in his world of 1781, "felt" it, as the bride at Tangier had "felt" him... He went on to the inn where his first concern, on finding himself in warmth and dryness, was to send two hostlers to fetch Black Damn from the schooner.

He was through with that ship and its lucklessness. There was a ferry from Annapolis to Rock Hall. It had good fast boats. He would take the first one that the weather let start. He looked the hostlers over, decided that they knew their business, fed them handsomely. Then he called for a hot toddy and went to bed. By great good fortune he was able to have a chamber by himself.

He slept, though with fevered fitfulness. At each awakening, he listened to the wind. It would slacken, he decided, by early afternoon of the next day.

He was right. At two o'clock it was called through the inn's public rooms that there would be a ferry leaving for Rock Hall at three. It was about a four hours' sail.

In the meantime, he had had evidence that rumors of some action at the front were spreading. They were false, but they were being repeated. A businessman in the inn parlor gravely assured all hearers that there had been a great naval battle. And so forth and so forth. The colonel, with George Washington's despatch in his saddlebag, listened. The telling of garbled reports of course made the delivery of the truth the more imperative. Well, he had a fair wind now. He had Black Damn. He thought he could count on progress at last.

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The ferry left on the stated hour. At Sandy Point, eight miles north of Annapolis, it passed under the Bay Bridge, a seven mile steel highway that, in 1974, carried motors across Chesapeake at a minimum speed of forty miles an hour. A passenger on the 1781 ferry remarked that, in the memory of his grandfather, Indians, paddling across, had started at the Point, since there the Bay was narrowest. "They got over in half a day," concluded the reminiscer.

The ferry had twenty-five northeasterly miles to travel. It arrived at seven that evening.

Then Tench Tilghman was ashore. Then Tench Tilghman's horse also was ashore. Then Tench Tilghman had the Philadelphia road before him. The last stage of the journey had begun. "Ride Colonel. *Ride!*"

He rode. It was a leveling out and a shooting forward. It was a blackness and a fire. It was a far-reaching expanse of quiet and a close surrounding ring of sound. It was a motionless world in which he alone was motion. Ride, Colonel.

It was freedom from other agencies than himself. Not ponderous nailed-together planks now, grating to a stop on a wet hill of sand. Not sheets of cloth, responsive to the wind instead of his wish, dragging him west when he would go east. None of the impediments of mechanical transport. Just himself, one with his horse. Just motion.

Ride.

The highway before him was a soft dirt track. It was empty — no one travelled at night. It was dark — the plantation homes were miles apart and faced toward the streams rather than the road. He knew the route well. He had ridden it many times. It was indeed one of the main thoroughfares of colonial America. He thought of it now simply as distance. Ride!

A hundred miles. He rode.

Black Damn winged him on his way for the first two stages, from Rock Hall to Chestertown to Downs Crossroads. At last the stallion had the desired expression for his wrath. At last. He hated the road. He tore at it with his hooves and thrust it behind him. In two hours he ran thirty-six miles. A third of the distance.

And the colonel, pulling up in the lighted yard of the Downs Crossroads station, shouted for his replacement even as he stopped — "A horse for the Congress! For the Congress! A horse!" — until the hostlers came running. Then he got down and looked at Black Damn. Black Damn, he saw, was tired, was exhausted — but angry still. He would be all right. The Colonel paid double for his care and turned to look at his substitute. A big

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squarish bay, virtually certain to be stiff-gaited. He was up and away.

Ten miles to Warwick. The bay pounded it out in fifty minutes. There again the colonel shouted it — "A horse for the Congress!" — and they brought him a mare. She was smooth of gait but slow. It was ten miles to Odessa — and it took her an intolerable hour. He had come halfway. Fifty miles were before him.

He scarcely noticed his changes after that. Stations were rings of noisy light on a long uncoiling cord of quiet dark. Ride. That was it — that was all. Forward, forward — so went his mind, his movements dependably automatic.

At one stop a barmaid ran out into the yard and gave him a tankard of ale. "With the compliments of mine host, sir," she said. "We are patriots."

Then, looking with earnestness into his face, she asked him to stop and rest, assuring him of a bed that would be clean and fresh. He smiled at her, said he would be back another time, chucked her under the chin and gave her a coin. He was scarcely conscious of her as he did these things.

Nor was he conscious of his horses. He simply made the most of them, fitting by lifelong skill his body to the beasts' capacities and tempers. Still less was he conscious of his fever. It had never left him and now it increased. His head rang with other sounds than those of hooves. There were lights that seemed to travel with him, a little behind and to one side. As if pursuing. He paid them no attention. He knew they were not there. He would make his distance. That was all. To the house of the President.

From Newcastle north his route coincided with a 1974 four-lane expressway. He galloped among vast screaming trucks and neon abominations, steadily thickening. At one point he rode through the ambulances, police cars and crowds incidental to a 1974 routine rear-end accident, five killed, and his mission burned in his mind like a coal — "The Revolution is over. Cornwallis is taken. Ride!"

And so, at three quarters after two, he came to the end. He clattered up the Philadelphia street and drew rein. At the corner of High and Market. Before the house of the President of the United States in Congress Assembled.

He got down lightly, got down with the slow lightness of fever combined with fatigue. "When, in the course of human events —" When, in the course of human events a man, ill or well, has ridden a hundred miles, he has an inalienable right to be tired. The colonel did not think of applying this adaptation of Mr. Jefferson's

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Declaration to his own condition. He did not think of his inalienable rights at all. He went with his dreamlike movement up the steps to the President's door, lifted the knocker and knocked once. There was no sound within.

He knocked again and still there was silence. He repeated the single knock several times more and went on to doubles and triples. He got no answer. He looked at the door.

It was white enameled. It was of chaste design. It was impassively beautiful. He did not see it, really. A door? A sandbar, a gale, post horses slow, hard-mouthed and stiff-legged, a fever, obstructions. He raised his arm and struck the lovely panels with his fist. And, doing this, he raised a cry too, a cry that filled the street. "News!" he shouted. "Great news! For the Congress!" And then he said it — "Cornwallis is TAKEN!"

Cornwallis was taken? Oh, no. Not Cornwallis. Who was he? One man, one officer, with one army at his command. He — taken? Not he, not any man, not any army — but tyranny itself. Tyranny was taken. Freedom was set free. So, in effect, said Colonel Tilghman. And a hand was laid with firmness on his shoulder, and he turned to confront two men. One had a bulls-eye lantern, the other a leveled pike. They were members of the watch and they told Colonel Tilghman that he was under arrest for disturbing the city's peace. He might have done anything.

He might have shot them both. He might have laughed. He might have lain down on the stoop and gone to sleep. As it was, he did not have to act at all. A second-story window opened in the house, and the nightcapped head of the President of the United States came forth. General Washington's messenger was recognized and taken inside. The despatch was delivered.

And the watch, going on its rounds, told the dark house fronts not that it was three o'clock and all was well, but that at three o'clock on that particular morning Cornwallis was taken. And some people were awake and heard and went out of doors, and others wakened and heard and went out of doors, and soon the streets were full of Americans rejoicing. And the Liberty Bell was rung.

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THE NIGHTFALL EFFECT

Once, many years ago, when I had just turned 21, I wrote a story called "Nightfall," which, to my utter astonishment, turned out to be a classic.

It began with a quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays, one which John W. Campbell of *Astounding* had called to my attention. It went:

*If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore, and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God?**

Campbell wanted a story that would put that quotation in reverse and I was glad to oblige. I set my story in a world with six suns. It experienced nightfall under unusual circumstances only once in a long while, and when the stars appeared, everyone went mad.

I never thought that such a story had any predictive value at all. I could imagine my positronic robots coming to pass. I could even conceive of my all-human Galactic Empire being founded one day. But

**A few years ago, I admitted in print that I had never been able to find the source of the quotation. At once, dozens of letters arrived giving me the precise reference. So please, Gentle Readers, cease and desist from here on in. I now know.*

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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intelligent beings going mad at the sight of stars? And in my own lifetime?

It's happening. The thought of human expansion into space, the thought of man reaching for the stars, seems to drive some people into an unreasoning frenzy. They begin to think of reasons against it and, in their madness, can come up only with mad reasons.

Let me be specific. A couple of years ago, Professor Gerard O'Neill of the physics department of Princeton University began to publicize his idea of establishing space colonies at the Trojan points of the Earth-Moon system*, with the Moon itself serving as the source of the structural material.

I was skeptical at first because for years I have been banging away at the notion of colonizing the Moon itself. It took a while for me to see that I was suffering from what O'Neill called "planetary chauvinism" — the assumption that human societies must be built on, or just under, the surfaces of large worlds, just because that's where, by the accident of circumstance, the only technological society we know of happens to exist.

After my reading and thinking, however, he won me over. I became a convert to his views. (I may not be 21 any longer, but I'm not so old as to have lost my flexibility.)

I began, therefore, to write articles boosting O'Neill's notion. In particular, I wrote one called "Colonizing the Heavens" which appeared in the June 28, 1975 issue of *Saturday Review.*

As a result of that article, I received a number of letters, some of them polite and some of them nasty, but all of them expressing the gravest doubts not only concerning the value of O'Neill's idea, but concerning the value of *any* notion of leaving Earth. Reading the letters saddened me, for there was not a sane attitude in the lot. Some of the objections were earnest and well meant, but none were sane.

None of my correspondents, for instance, raised either of the two technical considerations that most tend to spoil the pretty picture of space colonization. Here they are:

First: The Universe is, by and large, a dangerous place for life because of the cosmic ray flux which, as far as we know, exists everywhere. Cosmic rays are highly penetrating, highly dangerous, and cannot easily be warded off or neutralized by anything man-made.

We get along on Earth because we have a planetary magnetic field that diverts some of the cosmic rays and miles of atmosphere that serve to

*See *"The Trojan Hearse," December 1961*

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absorb the worst of them. We would get along on the Moon, which has neither a magnetic field nor an atmosphere, because we would build a colony under meters of Lunar crust, and that would serve as adequate protection.

In a space colony, however, in which the walls are relatively thin and the atmosphere is on the inside, can the human inhabitants be protected from cosmic rays? O'Neill thinks that if the colony is large enough, it can be designed to absorb enough of the cosmic rays before they reach the people.

Second: A space colony has an insignificant gravitational field of its own, and it is possible that without a gravitational field, life would be uncomfortable and even, in the long run, impossible. In order to supply the equivalent of gravity, then, it is proposed that the colony be made to rotate rapidly enough to produce a centrifugal effect that will hold everyone to the inner surface of the curved wall of the colony with a force equal to Earth gravity.

A centrifugal effect in a comparatively small colony does not, however, truly duplicate the gravitational effect on a comparatively large world. The intensity of the centrifugal effect drops off rapidly as one rises up from the colony's inner wall, while the intensity of the gravitational effect falls off only very slowly as one rises up from the world's surface. We will be trading Earth's constant gravitational pull for the colony's highly variable one, and that may mean trouble.

A related problem is that of the Coriolis effect, which is small but measurable on Earth, and which would be far more intense on the colony. In essence, it would mean that if you jumped upward, or threw something upward, you or it would not come down in the same place. The behavior of moving bodies would be quite different from that on Earth, and that might mean trouble.

These were not the kind of objections, however, that my correspondents raised. They raised others instead, quite foolish ones — foolish enough to make it seem that they are all suffering from what I call "the Nightfall effect" (madness at the sight of the stars).

Some correspondents, for instance, dismissed the whole thing as "science fiction" and were very indignant that the magazine and I should have pretended that we were dealing with actual science.

Alas, it was quite clear that these people knew that I was a science fiction writer and therefore, I suppose, felt that this was a good way in

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which to express their contempt for me and for the article at the same time.

In doing so, however, they revealed that they didn't know what science fiction was (except, perhaps, as "something written by Isaac Asimov").

Science fiction, at its most rigorous, deals with extrapolations from the present state of scientific theory and technological art. It assumes at least one advance that may or may not be possible, that may or may not ever take place, and then proceeds to tell a story.

The notion of space colonies, as advanced by O'Neill, does not do this, however. It makes use of "on-the-shelf" technology, of methods and techniques that are possible right now, and makes not one advance, however minor, beyond the present. In that respect, O'Neill's space colonies are not science fiction but are straightforward space technology.

Who says so? I? Isaac Asimov, the science fiction writer?

Of course not. I'm no expert in this. It's Gerard O'Neill who says so and his credentials are impeccable. He is not only a physics professor at Princeton, but he is highly regarded for his advances in nuclear research. It was he who conceived the idea of particle storage rings in which two accelerators send beams of particles crashing into each other head-on, producing large increases in collision-energy without the necessity of having to increase the size of the accelerators. (See his article on the subject in the November 1966 issue of *Scientific American*.)

It is, of course, possible for O'Neill to be mistaken. He is brilliant, but even brilliant people are human and can trip over their own feet. Yet his notion of space colonies has been published and discussed openly and at a number of conferences, and it has withstood what one might call the heat of the kitchen. Just this morning (as I write) NASA has come out with the suggestion that a space colony (not quite in the form O'Neill proposed) be built in the course of the next half-century.

I would say, then, that the notion is *not* science fiction.

Of course, my correspondents may have meant that space colonies were science fiction merely because they did not yet exist. That may be their definition of science fiction — a reference to anything that doesn't yet exist. In that case:

— A landing on the Moon was science fiction in 1968.

— The nuclear fission bomb was science fiction in 1944.

— The airplane was science fiction in 1902, and so on.

If that's science fiction then I ask nothing better than to write science fiction articles for general magazines from now on.

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A number of my correspondents felt indignant over the fact that I was raising false hopes over the expansion of the human habitat, that I was helping to convince people that mankind would soon spread out into space and that human beings need not feel any necessity to limit population. The population explosion would then continue and mankind would be doomed.

This bothered me, and I admit I blamed myself for not making it perfectly clear in my article that, in the short run, space colonization would not in the least affect the necessity of reducing the birth-rate on Earth. After all, if we build a space colony to hold 10,000 people over the next fifty years, what will this mean in comparison with the fact that at the present rate of increase there will be 7,000,000,000 (seven billion) *additional* people on Earth by then. Subtract 10,000 from 7,000,000,000 and you still have just about 7,000,000,000.

I am as aware of the danger of the population explosion as any man on Earth*, and yet the attitude of those who wrote me struck me as excessive to the point of irrationality. They apparently feared that any amelioration of the lot of mankind was bad because it would encourage a further population explosion. It seemed to me that they desperately wanted matters on Earth to grow rapidly worse as the only means of convincing people to take action. It was as though they were relying on catastrophe to prevent catastrophe.

But is that the only way out? The efforts, on the one hand, to control population and, on the other, to ameliorate the human condition, do not strike me as necessarily mutually exclusive. Let us consider an analogy —

Suppose a man is deeply in debt and must somehow gain the money to pay it off in the course of the year, or face death. He has a certain income and if he cuts expenses to the bone, he may save enough to avoid death. But then suppose a friend comes along and points out to him that he might increase his income by taking certain actions.

Is this friend doing the debtor a disservice? Will the debtor, noting that he can increase his income, proceed to spend more than ever, thus actually increasing his debt and making his own death certain? Or will he welcome the increase and realize that he can cut his expenses *and* increase his income at the same time, and that by doing *both* he will make it more

**See "The Power of Progression," May 1969; "Stop!," October 1970; Earth: Our Crowded Spaceship (John Day, 1974)*

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probable that he will live than if he concentrated on either strategy alone?

Well, which will he choose?

If he is stupid to the point of madness, he will allow the extra income to lure him into increased debt. If he is weak to the point of madness, he will refuse the added income for fear that it will lure him into folly. If, on the other hand, he is sane, he will see the value of the combined strategy.

The people who write to me are clearly convinced that human beings are, collectively, stupid and weak to the point of insanity. Well, maybe they are, but *if* they are then nothing will save our civilization and we might as well forget all about strategies. Therefore, we have nothing to lose if we assume, as an academic exercise, that human beings will, before it is too late, act rationally enough to save civilization and we ought to push for the most valuable strategy. That is to cut the birth rate as far and as fast as we can and, *at the same time*, to do what we can to maximize room, food, energy and resources.

To be sure, my analogy is not quite accurate in that the debtor is pictured as knowing the desperateness of his situation whereas a large percentage of the Earth's population is either completely unaware that there is a population problem at all, or, being aware, chooses to deny its importance for a variety of reasons. But this is something to be countered by education in some fashion other than by the desperate invitation of catastrophe. If only catastrophe will educate, then humanity is mad and civilization will die — and I am assuming this is not so.

Some of my correspondents objected that the whole thing would be too expensive.

NASA suggests that the first space colony will cost a hundred billion dollars spread over the next fifty years, and that's two billion dollars a year. But put that in perspective and you will see how irrational the expense objection is.

How much do Americans spend on alcohol and tobacco each year? Frankly, I don't know, but I'm willing to bet it's more than two billion dollars a year.

That is true, I think, if we just count the money spent on the actual physical drinks and smokes. What about the money value of the people killed and maimed by drunken drivers? What about the money value of the buildings burned down and the people killed by people who smoke in bed? What about the money value of the forests burned down by smoking campers? What about lung cancer and heart attacks due to smoking?

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Add it all up. If we can spend astronomical amounts on habits known to be deadly, both to those who indulge and to many who do not, isn't it insane to object to spending less on a program that may do mankind infinite good?

You may want to argue that individual people enjoy smoking and drinking and won't give it up for colonies in the sky, and that it is cheap for me to condemn the habits when I don't possess them and therefore don't know what I'm missing.

In that case, consider warfare. How much money has been spent (just money; never mind lives and such abstractions as human happiness) on wars thus far in the twentieth century? How much money has been spent and is being spent on preparations for war?

Suppose we develop a world without war? The money saved will pay for the program of space colonization many times over, and we won't even speak of the lives saved and the misery abolished.

Then, too, remember that the price of war (and of alcohol and tobacco, too, for that matter) has been going up steadily each decade through all modern history. The price of space colonization is, on the other hand, likely to go down. More and more the Moon will be used as the quarry, space as the work-arena, the colonists as the workers. More and more the colonists will return more to Earth (in the form of beamed solar energy, for instance) than they take.

But is all this hogwash? Is it impossible that humanity will give up war and disband its armies and, therefore, that it will never have the money to spare for space? In that case, it is also impossible that we will move very far into the 21st Century with our technological civilization intact. No strategy will save us, and we may as well amuse ourselves by aiming high.

Some felt that space colonies would be a fiasco since no one would want to live in an engineered environment.

Does one laugh or weep at that piece of madness, since no one can possibly maintain that view without carefully ignoring every scrap of human history.

The first cities were built about 10,000 years ago, and every succeeding decade since has seen the Earth, on the average, more urbanized. There have been declines in urbanization during dark ages, but dark ages have always been localized (at least till now), and the overall movement has remained upward. Some 15 percent of the American population lived in urban areas in 1900, but in 1970 the figure was 87 percent.

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Clearly, urban areas are more engineered (more artificial, more removed from the original natural state, more dependent on a complex technology) than rural areas, and the level of engineering in cities has been steadily rising. Far from people rejecting engineering, then, all history of the last ten millennia shows humanity to be rapidly hungering for ever more engineering. Today the movement toward the cities is greater than ever.

In the United States, some of you may say, isn't there a flight *away* from the cities? Yes, indeed, there is, a flight from the *central* cities, where the engineering is obsolete and breaking down. The flight is to the city's outskirts, the suburbs, where the engineering is efficient. The flight is not away from engineering, but toward better engineering.

Is there a movement back to the soil? There always is in every generation — a tiny (but noisy) ripple in a tidal wave.

How is it possible then to say that no one would want to live in an engineered environment?

Some felt that it was the location that mattered, that no one would want to leave Earth and go live in a space colony.

Mind you, those who write this in letters to me are Americans and presumably have some bare-bones knowledge, at least, of American history. And in that case, how can this suggestion be anything but the product of irrationality?

Imagine that someone makes the following proposition to you: You are to get onto a small sailing-vessel, with bad food and water and with no privacy. You are to spend six weeks pitching and tossing on an ocean where the first real storm will sink you. If you survive and make a landing, you will find yourself in a trackless wilderness amid a hostile native population. Would you go?

Many people did. That was how the American colonies were settled in the 1600s. Some eleven thousand people came to the colony of Virginia between 1607 (when it was founded) and 1617. Of these, ten thousand died, leaving only one thousand survivers in 1617. Yet people continued to come.

Or imagine this proposition: You are to take a crowded steam-ship that will take a week or more to make the voyage. You will travel in steerage and end up in the slums of a crowded city working in a sweatshop. Would you go?

Millions did throughout the 1800s and very early 1900s and filled the

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United States with every ethnic group of Europe.

Or imagine this proposition: That you get into a wagon, or that you possibly go on foot, and cross 1500 miles of untamed land, some of it desert, and all of it subject to incursions by hostile natives. For your pains you will reach territory that may or may not contain gold, which you may or may not find after infinite pains.

Any number did exactly that in 1849 and afterward. And some joined a similar mad rush a half-century later to seek for gold mines in polar Alaska and Canada.

Not want to go? All history shows us that when an old life has become unbearable, people will dare any danger, and go to any lengths in order to find a new life and make a new start.

It seems almost inevitable that over the next fifty years, while the people of Earth try desperately to stop population growth, life will become steadily less bearable.

Not want to go then? With ten thousand posts available in the first space colony, I suspect that ten million will volunteer.

Some looked forward to a future where space colonies were plentiful, and they feared that the educated, sophisticated, and intelligent would leave Earth — the beautiful people Earth couldn't afford to lose. They felt that the colonization of space would leave Earth a human wreckage-heap.

These, too, forget American history with a thoroughness that seems to require irrationality.

Why should the educated, the advanced, the well-off, want to leave Earth for the space colonies? They would be comfortable here. Was it the educated, the advanced, the well-off who flocked into the cockle-shell sailing vessels and the stinking steerage of steamboats to get to the New World? Was it the educated, the advanced, the well-off who left the cities of the East for the gold mines of California?

No, sir. Those who came were not the British peerage, but the starving Irish peasants, not the Tsar's entourage, but bedraggled Jews from the ghettos. Yes, some scholars came, but the vast majority were those who were so badly off at home that not all the dangers and difficulties of the trips, not all the hardships in the new land, would keep them away.

There is Emma Lazarus's poem inscribed on the Statue of Liberty to make the point. Part of it goes —

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

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The wretched refuse of your teeming shore
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me:
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

Perhaps I remember this better than those who wrote me letters, because my parents and I were part of the wretched refuse. We landed on Ellis Island in 1923, one year before the golden door was shut.

We're not going to lose the best people to the colonies. It's the poor ones who will clamor to go. We will have to bribe and browbeat the fat-cats, if we want any of them to go.

Some feared that the colonies would end up racist; that "Third World people" (my correspondent called them that) might want to go but couldn't, lacking all ability at space engineering and having no experience with space.

How can anyone suggest this even in a fit of madness?

My parents (to get back to them) had never seen the ocean till they made their trip to New York. They had never seen an ocean liner till they boarded one. And after they boarded it, do you think they had the slightest notion of how it worked, or even of how it floated? That didn't stop them from going to the United States.

For heaven's sake, is it difficult to understand that to go from Earth to a space colony, one does *not* need to be a space engineer, one does *not* have to pilot a spaceship, one does *not* need any experience with space?

What one needs to get there (hold your breath, now) is a *ticket.**

So there you have the Nightfall effect. Some people faced with the stars go mad. What other conclusion can you draw from such arguments as they have presented?

It may be that by the time we enter the 21st Century our technological civilization will be irretrievably falling apart. If so, we will not go out into space; we may never go out into space.

But let's suppose we do survive into the 21st Century. In that case, in a low-birthrate world without war, space *will* be explored and colonized, and the stage *will* be set for a new and greater expansion of mankind to a new and far higher level of civilization.

**People might not be able to afford a ticket, but that's a different thing, and is something to be solved by an economically sane society, which I hope will be developed by the 21st Century.*

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I won't live to see it in actuality, but that doesn't matter at all, for I see it in my mind's eye, and — providing only that our civilization survives — *I know it will be so!*

An Extrusion Of Lions

There was an extrusion of lions in Valladolid
On the eighth day of the seventh month
of fourteen-hundred and seventy-seven.
(There is, I have heard, a street named after that day.)

There was an extrusion of lions,
swift, sudden, tawny yellow.
Lions came from walls, windows, shutters,
from cobblestones and the closets of whorehouses.

There was an extrusion of lions,
roaring, copulating, eating people and horses.
It was a nine-days wonder, as the saying hath it,
disturbing kings, queens, prelates,
disturbing the greater nobility.

There was an extrusion of lions in Valladolid,
and for each that appeared
a townsman born under the sign of Leo
vanished instantly.

There are no extrusions of lions in our time,
not even on feast-days,
but when Berlioz died a scorpion appeared.

— Bertrand Gironel

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Larry Tritten, a contributor to Playboy, National Review *and many other periodicals, offers an unusual item, a short-short and a black comedy of sorts . . .*

Final Cut

by LARRY TRITTEN

It began on a Saturday, with the disappearance of Spokane. A United Airlines 747, bound for Spokane from San Francisco, arrived at its point of destination to find that Spokane was missing. At first it was assumed, naturally enough, that an error of navigation was at fault, but finally the aircraft was forced to divert to Seattle where, by that time, the absence of the smaller city had been confirmed. Then, while the incident was still being perplexedly appraised by the government for a security classification status, Boise, Idaho vanished on Sunday evening. Phoenix followed suit shortly after midnight on Monday morning. All three cities were neatly removed from the surface of the planet, with all suburban environs, leaving nothing but a smooth plain of subsoil where they had been.

Fellswope called me to his office at the Center for Esoteric Studies on Sunday evening. By then the news had still not leaked out through the media. He told me what had happened and poured me a Golgotha (a drink of his own invention, decidedly lethal), which I drank as I waited for the punch line. But it was no joke, as he quickly convinced me both by assuming an uncharacteristic Karloffian expression and manner and by asking me to place three successive phone calls to random numbers in Spokane, Phoenix, and Boise. The operator suggested uneasily that "all lines were in use" and hung up without advising me to try again.

"Something going on," Fellswope said, and I was inclined to agree.

I finished my drink while he told me that he would miss Phoenix, having once spent a successfully decadent vacation there with an archaeologist's

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daughter, but that it was hard for him to muster any remorse for Boise or Spokane (although he admitted having had some excellent *moussaka* at Expo '74).

"What do you suppose *is* happening?" I asked him and had barely finished asking when a call came through with news that Cheyenne, Wyoming, was no more, all those steers, cowboys and cacti gone in the time it takes to flick lint from one's lapel.

We were in Omaha (where Fellswope's peculiar organization, which is the product of funds misappropriated by a nearsighted uncle of his in the State Department, shares building space with SAC), more than 1200 miles from the nearest of the disappearing cities; yet Fellswope suggested that we convene in the basement, that we continue our dialogue there, making trips upstairs to the computer room or for food whenever necessary. Thus, we confronted the problem from this subterranean vantage point.

We had a phone, the necessary charts, books and the like, access to the computers upstairs, and of course Fellswope's brain — that rare mechanism of speculative congnition to which my own mind could only be considered an addendum. It had been all we needed to solve the puzzle of the exploding Atomic Energy Commission physicists and the mystery of the obscene phone calls on the Presidential hot line, and hopefully it would be sufficient now.

The first thing we did was to make a list of possible sources of the phenomenon — (a) mass hallucination, (b) nightmare, (c) enemy aggression, (d) extraterrestrial activity, (e) natural phenomenon — and explore the likelihood and relevance of each. Mass hallucination seemed like an unsatisfactory answer strictly for statistical reasons. The possibility of a nightmare was a poor explanation for the simple reason (as Fellswope pointed out) that his mind virtually never produced dreams that were basically non-erotic in content. Enemy aggression was a poor bet, since the United States, China and Russia were on better terms with each other than they had ever been, as was illustrated by the fact that only the week before they had worked out a liberal cultural exchange program that would permit unrestricted travel between the three countries by all certified acupuncturists, ballet dancers, and Coca-Cola executives. Extraterrestrial activity was an intriguing concept — intriguing enough for Fellswope to attempt calling Erich Von Daniken for a consultation, but unfortunately the eminent scholar had been in Boise doing research on the

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possible extraterrestrial origin of Idaho potatoes when that city vanished. As for a natural phenomenon, the contingency could not be discounted, but it could not be investigated either, since by its very nature it lay beyond the realm of traditional human experience.

Assisted by the computer upstairs (we tossed a coin to determine who would make runs to the surface), Fellswope and I pondered the situation with heroic cerebration, pausing only to catch a few winks or send out for an occasional pizza. By Tuesday morning our desks were snow-banked with output tapes, graphs, charts, droodle paper and pizza crusts — yet we were no nearer a solution than we had been originally. In the meantime, Tucson, Missoula, Montana, and Rapid City, South Dakota, vanished, and a great migration eastward from the western states began.

On Wednesday morning sixteen small cities in Russia vanished. On Thursday afternoon Vancouver, British Columbia, ceased to exist. On Thursday evening Fellswope and I switched from pizza to take-out chicken, and I guess that was the act that struck the spark of revelation in his questing mind. As we opened our 16-piece bucket, I saw him lift out a drumstick with a cryptic half-smile and furrowed brow that connoted a truly fanciful notion or impression.

Fellswope held the drumstick up, sighting me over its tip. "Consider what's been happening in analogical terms," he said.

I gave him an obtuse glance. "Huh?"

"Our cities have been disappearing. But not our major cities. Something is responsible. Or *someone*...."

It was the first time either of us had broached *that* subject. The idea of including "god" in our list of hypotheses just hadn't occurred to us, although technically "he" could be categorized under the heading of extraterrestrial activity.

"Divine retribution?" I asked Fellswope skeptically, trying unsuccessfully to maintain an objective expression.

Fellswope gestured with the drumstick. "Consider. All these cities are being excised from the surface of the earth with almost *surgical precision*," he said. "Think of it! For just a moment give free reign to your imagination and try to envision some celestial surgeon of galactic heft and mass involved in an operation of —"

I cut him short with an uncompromising glare, but he was determined now, and serious, too, which accounted for the light film of perspiration that had appeared on both my palms. He got up and

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went to a blackboard and quickly wrote down the names of the 26 cities and towns that had vanished to date.

"Can you think of one thing they all have in common?" he asked.

I sat there waiting, listening, and then Fellswope lobbed his idea at me like a psychic stone.

"Every one of them," he said with conviction, "has a very small or minimal population of black residents...."

He didn't say any more. He turned and left the room and went upstairs to get the fixings for some drinks. When he returned he was humming *Camptown Races* lightly and whimsically (but without smiling) under his breath.

"What about the blacks who *did* live in those towns and cities?" I asked. "They vanished, too. Wouldn't you think Omnipotence could do a little better than that?"

"A surgeon has to cut away a little living tissue, too, in order to excise the dead tissue," Fellswope said, deftly pouring and mixing. "You remember, don't you, the old timeworn expression to the effect that a doctor isn't god?"

"Then you think "god" is —"

"Black and White Scotch?" Fellswope said, slipping one of the same into my unsteady hand.

We drank in silence for a time, then Fellswope said, "A really good surgeon acquires skill and confidence as he works, you know, and usually manages to get better and better with experience."

On Friday morning all of the Colonel Sanders chicken stands east of Chicago started to disappear. The ones in Dayton, Cleveland, Miami, Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., were the first to go, followed by all of those in New York state during a six-hour period on Saturday evening. And Sunday night Colonel Harland Sanders, sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch in St. Louis, a copy of the King James version of the Bible open in his lap, vanished with an audible popping sound before four witnesses.

By Friday people were starting to catch on. The Nielson ratings of *Sanford & Son* tripled; 95 per cent of the dance instruction studios around the country stopped offering tap-dancing lessons at any price, and the members of the Board of Directors of the Ivory Snow Soap Company all donned disguises and headed for parts unknown.

It was only the start.

As for Fellswope and I, we both decided to pool our available funds and back a Broadway revival of *Carmen.* And, as it turned out, it wasn't a bad idea, not half bad, and that's no jive, brother....

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REPORT ON COMPETITION 12

In the November issue we asked for, um, ridiculous collaborative titles. Well, it *seemed* funny at the time. And you are all, each and every one of you, to be congratulated for making this one work. Among the repeats we had: *The Female Man Is A Harsh Mistress; A Boy and His Stainless Steel Rat; A Case of Dandelion Wine; A Case of Nerves; Time Enough For Dhalgren; Dying Inside Outside* and *The Man Who Folded Himself Into A Wrinkle In Time.* We thought the winners were:

FIRST PRIZE

Venus Plus Who? by Sturgeon and Budrys
That Hideous Dhalgren, Lewis and Delany
OddPodkayne, Stapledon, and Heinlein
Triffids on the Half Shell, Wyndham and Trout
Rogue Thurb, Budrys and Panshin
Not Without Leibowitz, Sturgeon and Miller
I, Leibowitz, Asimov and Miller

—*J. Bagai*

SECOND PRIZE

Can You Feel Anything When I This Way Come? Sheckley and Bradbury
The Demolished Slan, Bester and Van Vogt
That Hideous Wine, Lewis and Bradbury
20,000 Leagues Under the Dune, Verne and Herbert
God Bless You, Mr. Leibowitz, Vonnegut and Miller

—*Margery L. Goldstein*

RUNNERS UP

I Will Fear No Eggheads, Heinlein and Leiber
Do Androids Dream of Imaginative Sex?, Dick and Norman
After the Gods Themselves Fell Apart, Asimov and Goulart
That Hideous Sheep, Lewis and Brunner
Stand On Your New Head, Brunner and Disch (also from others)

—*Arthur D. Hlavaty*

The Sheep Look Up Cryptozoic!, Brunner and Aldiss
I, Who? Asimov and Budrys
A Clockwork Counter-Clock World, Burgess and Dick
The First Men In Sheep, Wells and Brunner

—*Al Sarrantonio*

van Vogt and others:
Gather, Beagles
I Will Fear No Beagle
They Walk Like Beagles
Robots Have No Beagles
Hellstrom's Beagle
Seetee Beagle
I, Beagle

—*Larry Anderson*

Love Ain't Nothing But A Rendezvous With Rama, Ellison and Clarke
Of Mist, and Grass, and Who?, McIntyre and Budrys
The Steam Driven Boy and His Dog, Sladek and Ellison

—*Steven Utley*

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Make Love! Make Love! Harrison and Heinlein
Moderation, Bunch and Asimov
I Sing the Body Selectric, Bradbury and Davidson
When Ralph 124c41 Was One, Gerrold and Gernsback
Asimov's Annotated Guide to Asimov and Wilson

—*Albany State SF Society*

Nerves of Steel, del Rey and Asimov
Out of the Silent Rama, Lewis and Clarke
The Long, Loud Lovers, Tucker and Farmer
A Case My Destination, Blish and Bester

—*Algis Budrys*

COMPETITION 13 (suggested by Michael Kurland)
Write a passage from a myopic early sf or utopian novel, limit of 150 words please. This is a sample from one that might have been published in 1875:

"Yes, Professor Von Totree," the guardian expostulated, leading me onto the street for my first view of this future society, "while you have been asleep, great changes have been wrought in the structure of society, and in the very face of our planet. We must take you for a dirigible ride to overview the great Mediterranean dam."

"Why, what sort of magic is this?" I cried, jumping aside as a great horseless carriage sped by.

"No magic at all, but Science!" the guardian explained. "These auto-carriages provide our citizens a rapid and safe means of transportation at speeds in excess of thirty miles an hour. And, best of all, their internal combustion engines relieve us of the tremendous pollution problem that horses caused in the cities. Their only waste products are a variety of gases, which are quickly and harmlessly dissipated into the air."

"Why, what a veritable utopia this must be indeed," I churruped.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by March 10. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, Six different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks. Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 13 will appear in the July issue.

Answer to acrostic puzzle

Quotation: It's a beginning. It's an end. I leave to you the problem of ordering your perceptions and making the journey from one to the other.
Clues read down: S. Delany Empire Star

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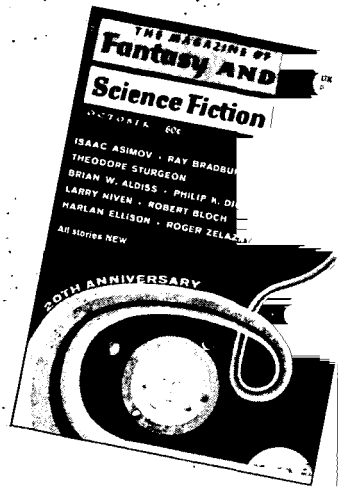

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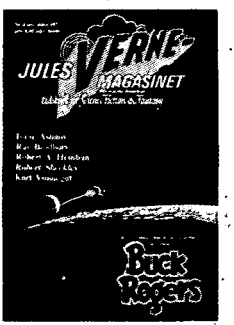

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